

The Man Who Doesn't Read Women

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It's difficult to have a conversation with someone about books when that someone is sticking a large needle into the muscle that surrounds your left eye. But each time I see my neurologist, he wants to talk literature..

I've struggled with crippling migraines that show up five or six times a week. The pain sickens me, but over the nine years of chronic pain, I have learned to treat the grinding pain and flashes of light that streak across my field of vision as an everyday part of life. Pain medication — primarily opioids — helps, but a search for a migraine prophylactic has failed.

Nine months ago, my Affordable Health Care Act-subsidized insurance plan finally approved me for Botox injections. That injecting botulism poison into muscles then prevents migraines is not wholly understood, but clinical evidence reveals it works for a portion of migraineurs, although it takes two-to-three sets of injections for effects to be felt.

The neurologist who performs the shots is not my regular doctor. The Botox doctor is a middle-aged white man. At our first meeting, he asked me what I did for a living. I told him that I was a writer, and we had a brief discussion about the types of subjects I wrote about. Three months later, when I saw him again, I was reading a copy of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. The doctor shared that he was reading a book about the D-Day invasion of Normandy, and we chatted for a couple of minutes about my visit to a small museum at one of the landing beaches in Arromanches-les-Bains.

I went in for my injections again in early February. This time, I was reading an advance copy of *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders. While the doctor prepped my forehead by cleaning it with an alcohol wipe, I mentioned how good I thought the book was, and how I would not be surprised if it were a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

It turned out I had touched on a sore spot for the doctor, and he complained to me that he had recently finished a book that had been awarded the Pulitzer a few years ago. "I thought that books that won the Pulitzer were supposed to be the best book published that year," he said, "but I was not impressed." Then he mentioned a couple other books that he had recently picked up, and he asked me if I thought he would like them.

"It's hard for me to tell," I said. I thought about how to choose my words. The doctor was now pressing a latex-covered finger against the next place along my hairline where he would stick the needle. "It seems you've chosen books that are a bit more masculine than I would normally read. I mean, they're well-respected writers, but they're known for writing very male-centered books." One writer he had mentioned wrote about masculine misery in the suburbs, while another wrote about life in the west. They weren't necessarily masculine topics, although at least one of the writers he had mentioned had been criticized for a portrayal of female characters whose only roles seemed to be their service to men.

"That's an interesting perspective," he said. "I don't think I've ever read a book written by a woman.

"No. Wait a minute. Yes. I have. *Charlotte's Web*."

Like most women, I learned a long time ago not to react to statements from men that feel like gut punches. It's the flipside of mansplaining. In the presence of a man who is a veritable stranger, you don't react in such a way that could arouse his anger. Especially in a small, closed room alone with a man who is in the midst of injecting you with poison.

"Actually," I said, in an even tone, "*Charlotte's Web* was written by E.B. White, who was a man. He was the same man who wrote *The Elements of Style*."

What I wanted to say was "WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN YOU'VE NEVER READ A BOOK BY A WOMAN?"

While a part of my brain was stunned by the information, another part of my brain was really not surprised. I've written about it a number of times. So have many writers.

More than twenty years ago, Francine Prose wrote an essay for *Harper's*. "The Scent of a Woman's Ink" probed an abscess festering in American publishing. In the putrid world she explored with her pen, men's bylines outstripped women's bylines by a huge factor in most major magazines and literary journals; men won the preponderance of literary awards; and, male writers such as Norman Mailer could get away with statements such as this:

"I have a terrible confession to make—I have nothing to say about any of the talented women who write today. Out of what is no doubt a fault in me, I do not seem able to read them. Indeed

I doubt if there will be a really exciting woman writer until the first whore becomes a call girl and tells her tale. At the risk of making a dozen devoted enemies for life, I can only say that the sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old-hat, Quaintsy Goysy, tiny, too dykily psychotic, crippled, creepish, fashionable, frigid, outer-Baroque, maquillé in mannequin's whimsy, or else bright and stillborn. Since I've never been able to read Virginia Woolf, and am sometimes willing to believe that it can conceivably be my fault, this verdict may be taken fairly as the twisted tongue of a soured taste, at least by those readers who do not share with me the ground of departure—that a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls.”

Women consumers spend more on books than men, although the “most likely” person to buy a book is a college-educated, black woman. And yet, it is still men who are more likely to be published. There are more books published by men out there, and I'm not talking about books from the nineteenth century. In 2017, Francine Prose's article should feel like an historical artifact, but anyone who has been paying attention knows that while changes have occurred, the literary world has not been able to escape the role that bias plays in who gets published, who gets reviewed and where, and whose work is most likely to be lauded as “genius.” (Go ahead. Do a Google image search for “literary genius.” I'll wait.)

The doctor is evidence that when it comes to women's writing, some men aren't listening. It is a land where women's stories are silenced. Rebecca Solnit argues that silence is a state that is imposed upon the powerless. In Solnit's discussion, when women's stories are not heard, that is an act of silencing. That same oppression whose end result is the absence of women from literature is also the same oppression that results in the lack of writers of color in bylines and among authors. The irony is, women authors and authors of color do not have to be writing about women or people of color: they can write about anything. The assumption that women can only write about women is like some essentialist view that women are only allowed to do “women's work,” whatever that's supposed to be.

In addition to the *sense* that stories are missing, we also have ways of measuring this lack: the VIDA Count conducted by Women in Literary Arts. Initially, the count, which measures bylines in journals and magazines, considered the count along a binary consideration: male-female.

In work that was conducted by Roxane Gay, the list was expanded to include an examination of those numbers that included writers' racial and ethnic identities. Further expansion allowed the count to add categories for disability, and to examine gender itself by breaking down the binary structure to account for writers who identified as trans-women or trans-men and within gender-fluid categories.

Breaking apart these categories revealed further types of silencing. While the ratio of male to female writers in 2010 is horrendous, further counts reveal that even as late as 2015, the last year of completed VIDA statistics, the chances that an article you are reading was written by a white man or white woman is still disproportionate to white representation in the general population. (For purposes of identification, I am a white, heterosexual, cis-gender woman.)

The attention that VIDA has focused on certain publications has had positive results.

Publications that published few women in 2010 have worked hard to achieve close-to-gender parity by 2015. But other publications have rejected VIDA counts, insisting that the effort it takes to go outside their networks of men writers to look for women writers would somehow upset the balance of the material they produce.

But my doctor's statement reminded me again that outside of the world where people read about these statistics, and suck their teeth or shake their heads, is a world where a lot of book readers still pick up the book where the name on the book matches the gender of the reader.

A respected neurologist is not an uneducated man, so any attempt to fob my doctor's comment off to general ignorance doesn't work. He knew enough about books to know what the Pulitzer Prize was and to have formed an opinion of what he could expect from a prize-winning book. What he was complaining about to me was that the book he read hadn't met his expectations for good writing. In thinking about this and other things he has said to me, I'm making the leap and assuming that he is both a cultural and political conservative. I'm also assuming that he doesn't read my work. Down here in Florida, where I moved at the beginning of 2016, I have found that most folks don't share my views. But, the doctor surprised me.

After confessing that he had never read a book by a woman, he asked me for a book suggestion. "Which woman writers should I read?"

The question left me speechless as it's so huge as to be meaningless. I sputtered a bit, and he asked me if I would call his office later with some recommendations for him. As I drove home, the names of women writers and books I loved flooded my brain. Gloria Naylor. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Margaret Atwood. Carol Shields. *The Woman Upstairs*. *Girls on Fire*. *Jane Eyre*. These, and dozens of names and book titles flitted across my brain.

I finally settled on Hilary Mantel and *Wolf Hall*. I thought the story of Thomas Cromwell's rise to power, the intrigue at Henry VIII's court, and that Mantel tells the story from the point of view of Cromwell to narrate the book — these all seemed like aspects of the novel that might draw him in.

I resisted the temptation to send him a book recommendation by Octavia Butler or Margaret Atwood. I thought that making him uncomfortable right from the beginning was not a way to start. The books that he had mentioned disliking by men were not all that culturally challenging, so I saw no point in presenting him with a woman writer who would arouse the same feelings. And I would also make sure not to mention Mantel's short story collection, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*. He could discover that on his own.

I will see him again in May. I'm hoping he will have taken my suggestion and will have read Mantel. He may have even picked up the sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, although I won't expect him to have. If he asks me for another book recommendation, I already know what I will suggest: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half a Yellow Sun*, a book that is set during the Civil War in Nigeria that many remember as the "Biafran Civil War."

If I wanted him to read fiction that reflects my experiences growing up as a working-class,

immigrant girl in America, my search for literature would be tough, a reflection of the fact that the class system has a disparate impact on who gets hired in the literary world, and who has the time necessary to write.

But for now, just getting him to read a book written by a woman is a challenge. In a nation where only seventy-two percent of adults read any book last year, sharing all of our stories is a challenge for all of us. When was the last time you read a book that was not written by an author whose identity was the same as yours? It's a question we should all be asking ourselves.