

The Lecture

Beneath the stretching shadows of tall buildings, a small book shop squats, half forgotten, half overlooked and half lost. A book shop where I do all my book shop shopping. A narrow passage of a place, with stacks of books instead of walls, and hardly enough room to swing one of those swinging things. It was this closeness that the shopkeeper particularly liked—or so he said.

"Nothing today?" the shopkeeper asked. He was a strange narrow fellow with a peculiar habit: he was always peering around at the piles of books, with a beaded brow, sweat I mean, licking his lips and enjoying the closeness.

"No," I answered, on my way out. I like to browse. I browse, looking at the covers and reading the blurbs. Then I go home and imagine the plots for a few days, and the one I imagine the best, I go back and buy.

Still on my way out, by accident I noticed the Literary Notice Board, beside the door. Also by accident, I noticed a notice. Finally, by sheer disregard for personal safety, I read it.

Margaret Doody Lectures On

The History Of The Novel

McGill University, 8pm, Saturday 4th, Room XYZ²

It was today. Now, I've always liked novels, and never bared a grudge against history—at least not openly—but in a University? Mmm. All those smart people. I was sure they'd know that I wasn't an actual student. I was sure they'd know I was just a garbage man who always liked novels and never bared a grudge against history—at least not openly.

Despite all this, I decided to go. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I provide an essential service. I'm worth my weight in garbage. I'm proud to be a garbage man. And in any case, I would sneak in and sit in the shadows at the back.

The first thing I noticed, after the crumbling outer walls and the ivy growing on the crumbling, and all the smart boys and girls, sitting on the lawns having smart conversations, and the security guard eyeing me suspiciously, and, inside, the hush of the corridor, and the dust in every crack and crevice, as I say, the first thing I noticed was a stick out sign, above a door, saying, "Porter." Yes, it actually said, "Porter." Very Oxbridgeian. "Porter," was what it said. There was a definite—and you can take my word for this—pretentiousness about that sign. And yes, garbage men do know words like "pretentiousness." We might not know how to spell it, we might not know how to say it, we might not even know what it means, but we know it. Amen.

I wandered up and down the corridor, trying not to step on the cracks between the tiles—they were, as I said, full of dust. Room XYZ². It seemed like you needed to be

a mathematician just to find the place. Reluctantly, I decided to ask the porter. I had no choice. It wasn't my fault.

Of course, I had imagined it, as I walked towards the stick out sign, but I was still surprised when I opened the door to see the porter sitting there actually drinking a bottle of Porter. He should have been sacked. And when I say sacked, I mean tied up in a cloth bag and tossed out with the garbage.

There was something very supercilious about him. And yes, garbage men do know words like "supercilious." We might not know how to spell it, we might not know how to say it, we might not even know what it means, but we know it.

"I'm looking for Room XYZ²" I said.

Now he looked at me as if to say, "What do you want with Room XYZ²?"

"Oh," he finally said, scratching his chin. I was sure he'd take out a pocket calculator to find the answer. "Room XYZ². Oh, you mean the *Church Room*." He stood up, slowly, as if he was the porter of all the school's magnificence and history and tradition: as if he carried all three on his own back.

"It's just next door," he said, pointing. And then he sat back down again.

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Where's what?"

"Next door," I clarified.

"Next door," he clarified.

"Thanks," I said.

He grunted, crinkling up his eyes dubiously. I was sure he was about to shout, "Guard, throw this fellow out. He's a garbage man."

So I left the porter to his Porter.

Quelle salle! as they say where they say things like that. They called it the Church Room, and by God—it *wasn't* a church room. Actually, it was one of those library rooms, with dark gloomy wooden panels and a dark gloomy portrait of a dark gloomy fellow. There was a large dark gloomy table in the centre, with a dozen chairs covered in dark gloomy green leather. Conservative men in tweed and a token eccentric wearing a bow tie occupied the seats. It was the perfect setting for the final scene in one of those final scene murder mysteries. I expected Miss Marple to stand up at any moment and state who done it, why done it and how done it. As far as I was concerned, the whole lot of them looked as guilty as hell. Like an attentive audience, smart boys and girls sat around the edge of the room, some on wooden chairs, others on the floor.

As I walked in, everyone followed me with their eyes. I was sure they knew I was a garbage man. What intangible—don't start that again, yes, garbage men *do* know words like intangible—quality was it that gave me away? Perhaps my stance. Perhaps my demeanour. Perhaps my manners. Then again, perhaps it was the smell. I was, I suddenly realised, still wearing my work clothes.

I sat down on the floor with the students. The ones

close by seemed to move away. Oh, they were so smart, these smart boys and girls. The one in front of me, wearing an expensive leather jacket—probably a present from his daddy—with rugged manly whiskers covering his face, glanced back at me with a royal smirk and nudged the smart girl beside him. She glanced and giggled.

A tweeded fellow at the table stood up.

“Could someone close the door,” he said.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is with the greatest pleasure that the English department sponsors this lecture by Mrs. Doody. She has published, amongst other volumes, *Misogyny in Neoplatonism; Was Shakespeare a Woman; The Machismo of Macbeth; Women Drivers and Gender Benders*; and *The Sisters Grim, A New Reading*.

“And so, without further ado: Mrs. Margaret Doody.”

I felt like saying, “Howdy.” But then, who wouldn’t? They all clapped—*that’s* who wouldn’t. They all clapped. Not me. I never pay for something until I know—at the very least—what it is.

Actually, Mrs. Doody did bear more than a passing resemblance to Miss Marple. She was a middle aged woman, rather chubby, wearing clothes that seemed to flatter the skills of the person who sold them rather than the taste of the person who bought them. The best part of her outfit was the red scarf with dots. It was not so much the scarf I liked, or the red, but the dots were perfect. They were as dotty as any dots are ever likely to be. Amen.

I was sure the lecture was going to be wonderful and

educational and interesting—right until the moment she opened her mouth. Within fifteen seconds I noticed several of the boys and girls yawning. Oh, they were so smart, these smart boys and girls.

Mrs. Doody had the perfect voice for training dogs. She spoke rapidly and incomprehensibly. All her words clung together in one long drone, as if they were afraid to be caught on their own, with occasional high pitched squeaks. It was something like this, though don't quote me:



I'm sure she had a sneaking suspicion that everything she said was crap, and dull crap, and figured the sooner it was over, the better for everyone—particularly herself. She had learned the first rule of rhetoric: talk fast and never stop.

I concentrated like mad, trying to catch a word here and there, to distinguish one blah from another.

"As you all know," she began in that dog training voice, "when we read a Novel—capital "N"—by which blah blah *The Iliad, The Golden Ass, Aeneid*, we do of course *enter into it.*" Now when she pronounced those last three words, the audience could literally hear the italics in which they were written. And written they were. Every word and every blah come straight from a pile of papers on the lectern. Now, this is what I don't understand: When *I* talk to people about things I *know*, it all comes

from my head, because I know it. So why does Miss Marple there and her Golden Ass take everything from those sheets of paper?

Anyway, I had no idea at the time, but those last three words, "**enter into it**," laden with such heavy italics that they could barely climb out of her mouth, were actually the beginnings of what those smart people call the "Thesis Statement." And yes, yes, garbage men do know words like that.

"Not only that," she blahed on, "but there is an attempt to **penetrate** the characterisation, to fully understand the **ins and outs** of motivation. As you all know, plot structure in the novel—capital "N"—by the necessity of omission, is formed by various **periods**. There is the possibility for **multiple climax**."

"As you all know, when an author of a novel—capital "N"—begins the work, we refer to the idea's **conception**. The writer then **gives birth** to the work."

"As you all know—" I was sure that, sooner or later, she would add, "except him there, hiding in the corner. The garbage man."

"Blah blah blah," she continued. "Blah blah blah blah, the muses, blah blah blah. Blah blah, blah balh, blah blah, women blah blah a certain importance. Roman authors of the novel—capital "N"—blah blah as Greeks, blah blah women blah importance blah."

"Blah blah blah blah, blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah blah." Miss Marple and her Golden Ass blahed on. The strain was too much for me. The consumption of calories

was exponential. I was losing an ounce of fat reserves for every word I rescued. I was already too thin to listen any further, and I allowed the long drone to wash over me like a Mediterranean tide.

"Blah blah blah blah blah—blah blah blah—blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah. Blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah? Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah, blah blah, blah blah blah blah. Blah blah. Blah blah. Blah blah. Blah blah Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah.

By now, even some of the fancy gentleman, sitting at the large dark gloomy table on the dark gloomy green leather chairs, were beginning to stifle yawns. Their mouths would open just so far, and then close again. They looked like a collection dummies owned and operated by a ventriloquist who had recently taken a vow of silence.

She was talking now at the speed of sound, and we were all waiting for her to crash through the barrier.

"Blah blah, for this reason that I reiterate that the novel—capital "N"—is a ***female form.***"

"Yahoo." Everyone clapped like mad. The fancy gentlemen stood up and clapped and smiled. Those who had actually fallen asleep now awoke and clapped loudest. Everyone was ecstatic.

Meanwhile, Miss Marple and her Golden Ass, who had spent half her life denouncing men, praising the neglected glories of womankind, glanced at the old boys network, gathered around the large dark gloomy table—and smiled a smile of triumph. She knew, and we all knew too, that she had joined their club. It was her finest moment.

About a week passed before I visited the narrow bookshop again. As usual, the shopkeeper was peering around at the piles of books, with a beaded brow, sweat I mean, licking his lips and enjoying the closeness. Only now, it all made perfect sense.