DEBAUCHERY DUET

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Laura Meets Jeffrey: Both Sides of an Erotic Memoir
By Jeffrey Michelson and Laura Bradley
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WITH THE CURE FOR AIDS SOMEHOW ALWAYS CLOSE BY BUT NEVER QUITE HERE, debauchery has taken a hit. Burning Man and other clothing-optional, orgy-tent festivals aside, prudent perverts and even the more moderately curious content themselves with monogamous relationships, condoms, his 'n' hers K-Y, and an Internet filled with porn. Jeffrey Michelson, in his recent "sexual memoir," covers those halcyon days following the proliferation of birth control in the 60s and the social awareness of AIDS in the 80s, and does so by celebrating not so much his own licentiousness as that of his libertine cohort of the time, prostitute and goddess Laura Bradley. Michelson worked for Norman Mailer in Provincetown during the Summer of Love, co-founded the pioneering adult publication, *Puritan*, produced graphics for Apple Records and The Rolling Stones, and later founded a short-lived, tongue-in-cheek rock band in London. The emphasis here, though, is sex, sex, sex in the age of Ronald Reagan.

Michelson writes of this exciting time with a young man's wide-eyed sense of discovery and, thank goodness, with the great good humor of someone advancing in age and bemused by the social and personal implications of youthful indulgence. The sugar rush of that first orgy, or the baby spanks leading to a quick descent into S&M, or to a lesser extent the heady effects of acid or mescaline or grass or cocaine, are overshadowed perhaps only by the utter newness of his first sexual encounter with prostitute-Laura in a

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New York cathouse: "We are a duet of pleasure noises from before our species walked upright," he writes. "I found the Holy Vagina Grail" (18). So swept-up was Jeffrey with Laura, so consumed was Laura with Jeffrey, that the impossible came to pass: whore and john moved in together.

We're swept up, too, in Michelson's gee-whiz ride as he explains to us new words and fresh concepts. Anal sex, we learn, is a fundamental act because fundament means the anus as well as "the founding principle" (34); a shagats is a gentile man (287); Umani means savory (22); comps are comprehensive presentations created by an art department. And nymphomaniac, he offers as a personality clue, "was the first big word I learned after 'delicatessen'" (52). Michelson acknowledges his own insecurity after mentioning the pre-album jitters of George Harrison, the Beatle-client of Jeffrey-the-art-director, but goes on to present randy math and fuzzy logic to confront the reader directly with his sex-charged hubris. "Now, if you're a guy who is better looking, more charismatic and/or wealthier than me," he writes, talking about porn actresses, "and we both meet twenty of these most eligible hotties with willing vaginas, you might get to fuck five of them whereas I might only get to fuck three. I got to meet 100 of them, however, and you probably never met any" (11). Point taken.

So over-the-top are Michelson's sexual encounters that at one point he pauses to make sure we're still with him. "I swear this is true," he writes, before continuing an account of one of main man George's orgies, complete with more mathematics to support the extent of his sexual labors. "I have my penis inside twelve different women and come eight times. It is the first time in my life that I ever had more than enough" (127). His devotion to truth-telling aligns with a discussion, early in the book, of that most useful item in the hooker's toolbox: the fake orgasm. "It's hard to tell the real from the fake," he notes, using a mechanic-and-lug-nut analogy to explain why prostitutes don't really come. "The CIA, Mossad and the KGB, with all their resources and black-ops, working for decades in conjunction with the finest doctors in the world . . . have been unsuccessful in ferreting out the litmus test for fake orgasms, so don't feel bad if you can't tell" (21–22). Once again Michelson jabs at the (presumably male) reader's own insecurities, but after all he could be speaking of the veracity of his own text. Is Michelson's 80s persona faking it for the more cooped-up culture of the aughts?

Norman Mailer, a key supporter of Michelson's book project and author of the Foreword, recognized that readers might dismiss Michelson's account

as male locker room bravado, albeit in extended literary form, and wisely suggested that the text include Laura Bradley's own recollections about the time. That creative spark, one month before Mailer's death, not only confirms that Michelson is a straight-up, undeniably-lucky guy but provides a feminine counterpoint that keeps the text fresh page after page. Here we have the call-and-response of an oversexed Sonny and Cher, a ramped-up Otis and Carla, a sweat-dazzled Meatloaf and Ellen Foley. Laura's side may be once-removed, transcribed by ur-punk Legs McNeil from interviews conducted after Laura had read the manuscript, but nevertheless her words segue well with Michelson's panting voice. Laura not only confirms Michelson's most stratospheric accounts but does so, in interleaved passages, with the same sense of humor and prideful conviction expressed by her one-time john-lover. "Ha ha ha" she laughs at the end of her passages, a fitting and feminine summation not only of her recollections of the time but of the serendipity, thirty years on, of speaking these words into a microphone.

With the confidence of Laura's support, the sex scenes are graphic and extended, conveyed in the colloquial and doubtless appealing to both the raincoat set and the *Fifty Shades* fanatic. We get the full-frontal treatment but, thanks to Michelson's fine-tuned humor and wide-eyed excitement, it's smooth going. A sample, pulled from the account of Laura's first orgy at GQ-handsome Larry's apartment, will suffice:

> I stand there and observe. Laura's delicate olive frame is the center of energy. I feel my blood pressure rising fast, kicking in the turbine on my hormones, shifting my libido to the red line. The one-woman, many-man configuration continually changes shape. I concentrate, listening to the slurps and ahhhss, wet squishes, slippery slides, an occasional "Beautiful," "Yeah, just like that," and, "Oh my God what an ass!" The syncopated clanging of her long earrings sounds better than Larry's lame background disco music. (152)

This comparatively innocuous description sets us up for all manner of rougher stuff to come, with four-letter light bulbs illuminating a second-by-second account of the scene as though they were strobes. We somehow trust that, over the years, Michelson actually remembers, for this particular orgy out of his professed three hundred, the duration of Larry's sated pause, the

order of release, and which of Laura's buttocks was kissed first. Or at least we trust that his words evoke the essence of the event itself. In modern visual pornography, captured with a handheld camera and in HD, the bored viewer might suddenly realize those remarkable qualities of an on-set couch or a particularly questionable lamp, oblivious to the slap slap slap of the onscreen action. Not so in the realms of literary porn, where the author manipulates our attention as well as our understanding. We're forced by the author's control to watch or, skipping passages, risk missing out on the, let's say, fundaments of the text. By book's end we feel as though we've been to all three hundred orgies. And yes, there are times when the authorial camera could have panned up with perhaps little lost, but ultimately that would equate to watching the Olympic medal ceremony but skipping the competitions. The essence is in the games, and Michelson's color commentary is engaging enough that, too, the reader never is tempted to look away from the erotic field.

Mailer's own erotic writing is at times less remarkable. Winner of the 2007 Literary Review Bad Sex in Fiction award for a few ill-chosen words in *The Castle in the Forest*, Mailer nevertheless recognizes fine bawdy literature when he sees it. "A subtle pathos mixes with an unquenching optimism," he notes in the Foreword, written after reading a first draft of Michelson's manuscript, "and the result—no matter what a plethora of the salacious we have here—is perversely—dare I say it?—Uplifting!" (xvii). Not bad, and considering that Mailer also has praised his early 80s interview with Michelson and Laura as "one of the three or four best out of 500 or more," Michelson might well have skipped a few orgies to celebrate. We learn that Mailer considered Hustler's Beaver Hunt photos, amateur polaroids of wives and girlfriends submitted by readers, more honest and interesting than the magazine's glossy and airbrushed professional shots. We're gratified that, in Mailer's world, love and sex do not fade with marriage or age. We're even a little skeptical, perhaps, when Mailer suggests that anal sex leads a woman to promiscuity. Mailer pulls his punch just a bit: "I'll leave that with your readers. They can think about it from their own experience" (120).

The interview, excerpted here as Chapter 20 and reprinted in Mailer's *Pieces and Pontifications*, is revealing but by now familiar to the Mailer community. But here we do find added value in Laura's observation of Mailer as an artist and man. "Norman loved to make himself laugh," she recalls:

> He seemed to have such a good time inside himself. And I specifically remember how Norman would take a long time to think about the questions before he answered. Then, sometimes he would get so serious and those eyes would pierce into mine, he would hold his chin and I felt like I had to listen very carefully because now it was very important for me to totally understand what he was saying. (119)

It's also somehow gratifying now to see Mailer's words in something approaching their original erotic context: the interview appeared in *Puritan* #7, with Mailer's name on the cover in pure-white print floating just below the coital intersection of a hat-wearing stud, fully clothed and cool in a wife beater tank, with a high-heeled blown-dry blonde, leg raised on the front bumper of custom car, looking backward with an expression that's less being caught *in flagranti* than just having flubbed the Daily Double on *Jeopardy!* One for both the Kinsey and the Mailer archives.

A full chapter details Michelson's disastrous sparring match with actor Ryan O'Neal, perhaps the most notable outcome from the eight-year-or-so string of amateur boxing bouts Michelson joined as a member of the Norman Mailer/José Torres Saturday Morning Boxing Club at the Gramercy Gym. (The chapter is reprinted in this issue of *The Mailer Review*). Michelson reveals Mailer's recipe for the perfect gin and tonic and his notion of the difference between good machines and bad machines: can openers, Mailer suggests with bulletproof logic, were bad machines "because they sucked electricity, took a worthwhile physical exercise away and were not necessarily faster or more efficient" (39). The account of Mailer, on his deathbed, giving advice and encouraging Michelson to finish the book, is brief but affecting.

Overall the Mailer content is slight and peripheral to the (dare I say it) main thrust of Michelson's narrative, but nevertheless the great author's presence as companion, motivator, and boss looms large. One of the pivotal moments, in fact, comes in the wake of a Mailer quotation, "'Repetition kills the soul,'" as Michelson ponders the sideways evolution of his erotic exploits with Laura (250). "I loved her passion and loved her perversion but the more coke she did, and the longer she kept at whoring, the less she was a hippie-hooker and the more she was just a cokehead whore. . . . Now when we did

have sex, it was as much about tying up and whipping as it was about fucking and sucking" (249).

Michelson's disillusionment with the orgy scene and with Laura's growing addiction to B&D and cocaine marks the downward slide of the relationship. The sweet-funny accounts turn rough, culminating with Michelson's uncharacteristically violent encounter with one male orgy-goer who persists in touching Laura against her wishes. "I look at the coke dripping from my nose and the whip in my hand and say to myself with none of the humor with which you might expect the line to be read. 'What's a nice Jewish boy like you doing in a place like this?'" Wait for it: "I swear that is the line verbatim" (275). The tone darkens further until Michelson's experiences become less evocative of those AIDs-free halcyon days and more a preview of the drug-infested, mid-80s porn world documented so remarkably in *Kamikaze Hearts*, the 1986 film account of actress Sharon Mitchell's relationship with girlfriend Tygr Mennet. Michelson's horrific encounter with Helene, a one-night pick-up following his separation from Laura, seals it: the guests are still awake but the party's over.

Michelson's book nevertheless leaves us with that punch-drunk feeling we get when we've done something vaguely imprudent but nonetheless loads of fun. We remember the warm sex, the funny sex, the name-dropping more than the rocky ending. The book is notable, too, for what's missing. Where are the peep shows and grindhouses, for example, so prevalent in Midtown Manhattan in the 70s and early 80s? Did Michelson's work for *Puritan*, the demands of his graphics gig, and his participation in orgies leave no time for watching porn loops in scummy booths and dark theatres? Al Goldstein, editor of the landmark porn newspaper *Screw* and a fabulous pervert, gets one paragraph. And Legs McNeil, Laura's transcript stand-in and author of the book's Introduction, perhaps deserves some time in the narrative beyond the brief mention, toward the end, of his friendship with Laura. These are minor quibbles, of course, but they are punctuated by one sin greater than any committed in Michelson's sexual exploits: aside from one cover shot with her beau, we have no pictures of Laura. Indeed, even the YouTube video of Michelson dramatizing the *Puritan* interview, with Stephen Mailer convincingly voicing his father, sports a Laura stand-in, Peri Lyons. We must not, it seems, view the goddess too willingly or too much.

From time to time Michelson ponders Laura's need for submission and love of whipping: "Maybe submission medicated her insecurity?" he wonders

at one point. "I knew I was travelling somewhere more dangerous than merely naughty—some place where metaphysics meets the road—but being a successful sadist was never my goal" (61). He finally comes to terms with the sadomasochistic overtones of the relationship through the work of Havelock Ellis, clandestinely researched at the New York Public Library one day while Laura was busy hooking. "Ellis says consensual S&M is not only pain to initiate pleasure," Michelson writes, "it's also violence—or the simulation of violence—to express love. Sadomasochism, Ellis believes, might appear to be controlled by the sadist, but it's really controlled by the masochist. That took the ugliest side away from it."

Suspect motives become positive and clear, at least for a while: "The master-slave relationship Laura and I lived was nuclear synergy where one plus one equaled four. It was an explosive shot of adrenaline. . . . It was living in the beauty and serenity of black and white and exploding to the vivid color and saturation of Kodachrome" (266–267). Michelson's transcendent words somehow reflect the reader's impression of this book, this time, this life. The author reveals a golden age with warmth, humor, and grace, using his whip-sharp wit to keep us involved. Perhaps the reader, satisfied, had some control after all.