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Acceptance Speech for the Joy J. MacSee Award

Distinguished guests and trustees of the MacSee Foundation:

First, let me extend my apologies for not being there in person to deliver this address. Sadly, financial issues preclude the cross-country trip to Utah. While this is, shall we say, a unique award, the ten-dollar honorarium does not cover the cost of a plane ticket. It barely covers photocopying and shipping by post (and certainly not express or overnight delivery, so my gratuitous extra apologies should this arrive late for the ceremony).

Before I begin thanking those who deserve some credit for my—success?—whatever you call it, I also want you to know that, as with Sartre and his Nobel Prize in Literature, I considered declining this award. For Sartre’s reasons, too: I worried this award might turn me into an icon. I believe the writer should be discarded, allowing the work to stand—or tumble over drunkenly

in a gutter—on its own merits. Still, awards of any kind look good on a resumé or bibliography. Besides, let’s be honest, who in the real world will know the reason this award was granted?

I think we understand one another. Thus, in accepting this award, I wish to thank the many people pivotal to my life and without whom my novel, *Roman à Clef*, wouldn’t exist.

At the top of the list is my mother, Elaine. How many terrible novels have been written by people whining about how their clinging moms loved them too much but never well? So, Mom, all my gratitude to you who gave me the safety and comfort of ten-hour TV days, then promptly smacked me in the back of the head and demanded, “Stop your goddamned daydreaming,” at least once during the remaining fourteen hours.

My mother was an attractive three-hundred-pound woman, one of the *most* attractive I ever saw, with rosy, tighter cheeks that made her look no more than two-seventy-five. True, she smelled a little off. She wore lots of lavender and lilac perfumes and lotions. To avoid dirty hair, she kept her head completely shaved and slipped on a clean wig when she left the house.

I’ll never forget that day I saw her as a rather striking redhead giving my father a blowjob. We were camping at a lake somewhere in Virginia—forgive me for missing a few details—my ten-year-old brother Kip and I in our Mickey Mouse tent, Mom and Dad in their great red palace. It was after midnight. I heard these awful cries and went to find their source. My parents had left a lantern burning in their tent, so what I saw silhouetted on reddish-orange canvas was a hulking form on four legs hunched over my father who screamed louder and louder from the agony. I thought he was being mauled by a bear. So, I did what every frightened eight-year-old boy would do when confronted with such a scene: I unzipped the door flap and stuck my head in for a better look at the catastrophe.

“Jesus Christ, Boy!” Mom shouted after several seconds when she realized I was there. A trail of spittle hung from her chin in exactly the same way I often saw it dangling from Grandma Esther’s whenever she drank too much Early Times.

Dad let out a piercing wail that hurt my ears. “Don’t stop, Elaine, I’m almost there!”

“Get the hell out of here, Mule...” She always called me Mule because she said I was thickheaded like a jackass, dropping the *r* and *t* I somehow inherited from Great-great-grandpa John Mulert, a Civil War hero who *deserved respect*, as Dad told me whenever I asked why I’d been given Grandpa John’s last name for my first. *John’s too common*, he’d say. *Could be ANY Civil War hero named John*. Anyway.... “Get the hell out of here, Mule. Now! Move it, or I’m gonna give you the whuppin’ of your life.”

“Come on, Elaine! Don’t stop! I’m dying here!”

I smiled at Mom and backed out of the tent. At least I understood. She was saving his life. Dad probably got bit by a snake or black widow or something while he crapped in the woods.

Since I thanked Mom, guess I should thank Dad, too. He was a mean old S.O.B., but he only ever gave me three really sound beatings: the first time for stealing, the second when a neighbor called him to complain about me swearing up and down the street like a *drunken sailor*, and the last because he couldn’t find Kip who’d gotten that same neighbor’s fifteen-year-old daughter *a little bit pregnant*—I guess Dad figured I could’ve stopped Kip if I tried. Regardless of the belt lashes, I knew Dad only wanted the best for me. How fondly I recall the times he looked at me with pride, staring down through the forest of his bushy black eyebrows and beard to say with all sincerity, “Don’t be an idiot, Mule,” which was the same as “I love you.”

Moving on, I’d like to thank Norman Dodridge—I’ve always wanted to mention his name in a public forum as, well, let’s say *revenge*. As much as Norman hung around me, you’d think

he was my closest buddy. If you stood by and watched long enough, as so many of the kids at Harrison High did, it wouldn't take long before you realized the only reason Norman came near was to beat me bloody and purple until one of his friends spotted a teacher and told him to stop. Norman was my size—if I were there, you'd see my eyes peek over the podium like a killroy, but I couldn't reach the arcing microphone without standing on my toes. He wasn't dumb as me, though. He made top grades and joined the chess team, where it's said he was a god. What's more, no one ever beat *him* up. I'm still not sure why he hated me so much. It's as if he had psychic powers and wanted to punish me for all the future generations of Dodridges that might be forced to read my novel in some bizarre college literature course.

Thanks also to Cynthia Watkowski, a woman every bit as attractive as my mother but only a third of her size. Like Mom, she shaved her head, although she bathed more regularly and never wore clean wigs when she left the house. Cyn could never be seen in town without a black anarchy tee shirt, black jeans, and a silver chain tying her nose to her upper lip as if one or the other might fall off at any moment and be lost.

I owe much of my novel to Cyn. She introduced me to that divine concept, the blowjob. I'd just turned twenty-one, and my community college buddies were buying me whiskeys at a local bar. Ronald Biggs—thanks to him also, while I'm thinking about it—walked right up to Cyn as she sat on a stool and said, “Suck off the birthday boy for twenty dollars?”

“Why not?” she said.

Ron pointed at me.

“The little guy?”

“Yeah, him.”

“Make it twenty-five.”

Ah, Cynthia. She was the first true love of my life for almost three minutes in the back of Ronald’s Cavalier before I suddenly felt the urge to scream, “Don’t stop, Cynthia! I’m dying!”

Next, I’d most definitely like to thank all my bosses, editors and colleagues at *The Domestic-Chronicle* in Pittsburgh, where I got my start in writing for profit. I was what my journalism teacher in high school would’ve called *a hack*—a writer who writes *a lot*...or maybe that’s a writer who writes *a lot of crap*. Hacks are notorious for churning out tons of badly written stories. As for me, I started out badly writing police blotters and dumbed-down entertainment clips on celebrities and local events. Then I moved on to badly writing political columns, which was something I was *quite* good at doing badly. I spent ten years at *The Domestic-Chronicle*. It was the day job so many people urged me not to quit. Perhaps I should’ve listened to them, but mule-headed as I was, I decided to take the next step. *What the hell!* I figured. If I could make a relatively comfortable living writing badly for a daily newspaper, I could probably make a *fortune* writing badly for the likes of Penguin or Knopf.

[ARCHIVIST’S NOTE: Author acceptance speeches are stored, as per the terms of the trust established by Joy J. MacSee in her final will, on a 1991-model Macintosh computer with little system memory. Again, as specified, archived speeches may never be transferred to any other electronic forum or storage unit (written copies sent upon request and \$10 donation to the MacSee Foundation Joy J. MacSee Award Fund). In the interest of space on the hard disk, assuring future MacSee Award recipients their speeches will be included in the archives, seven additional pages of thank-yous have been deleted from this speech by unanimous consensus of the board of trustees. To read these missing pages, please contact the author directly, or his immediate heirs and assigns. —A. B.]

Finally, I gratefully extend my sincerest thanks to the *MacSee Foundation* for the award. Thanks to the dozens of prestigious professional readers who selected *Roman à Clef* as their winner. God knows they must have suffered through hundreds or even thousands of horrible novels from around the globe, many in languages the judges couldn’t possibly know. Their dedication to this annual prize and to the *MacSee Foundation* shouldn’t be questioned. Also, my respect and admiration to Joy MacSee who truly did some kind of service for someone somewhere at some point in time by endowing this award. I’m sorry to admit that I’ve never read any of her terrible novels, though I guess that’s the point.

Ah, I bet you’re glad to have that out of the way. Now we can move on to the part you’ve been waiting for for far too long. This is the point in an acceptance speech where an award-winning novelist satisfies his audience by performing a piece from his celebrated book. Obviously, with me not present at the ceremony, this performance will be entirely relegated to print. You’re saying to yourselves, *That’s odd. Why not just read the book at home and imagine the author’s voice*—it’s rather nasally and high-pitched with a sort of squeak, I assure you—*echoing through the room?* But the answer’s just as obvious. Some of you have read the novel while serving as judges and, let’s face it, you’ll be damned before you read it again. The rest of you can, by enduring these two short passages, spare yourselves the hardship, not to mention the twenty-three dollars for a hardback copy.

This first excerpt is a perfect example of my writing style. How the Princeton grad from the mailroom assigned to edit my three-thousand page opus down to a respectable fourteen hundred failed to chop out this section or rewrite it, I don’t know. Could be the endless bottles of cheap Scotch I poured down her throat in hopes of a blowjob that never came. Or maybe she just went

through and chopped out pages at random. That’s what I would’ve done were I in her shoes—that, and I would’ve given the author a blowjob if for no other reason than to take a break from the prose.

I guess the best thing that can be said about this excerpt is that it and passages like it are the reason my novel has been mentioned in the same sentence with the likes of *Finnegans Wake*, usually as follows: “*Roman à Clef is nearly as incomprehensible as the Joyce classic Finnegans Wake, only without the sense of purpose one feels about trying to understand it. Nonetheless, many ivory-tower intellectuals will undoubtedly waste far too much of their lives trying to connect the dots in this book, only to figure out those dots were places where the author dropped his pen.*”

In any case, I’ll set the scene a bit. Here, the aptly named narrator, Fool, tries to use his superior knowledge of philosophers’ names to win the affections of an attractive blonde who strikes up a conversation with him after a philosophy class he’s not actually taking, having instead spent countless hours standing in the hallway outside the classroom listening to the professor babble on about all those remarkable...things. Anyway, here goes:

Chapter Four Hundred and Thirteen

Ooh, how he craved that sweet eschatology the sophists no doubt would’ve written of had they pictured her at rest on the love seat of the soul, watching for some sort of unmoved movement that pushed her toward bliss. Happy, bumbling, bubbly, nonsensical bliss! He knew right then that he had to solve her metaphysical paradigm or paradox

or puzzle box using every digression indigenous to the Freudian pleasure centers of his brain. He considered it a Kantian categorical utility of totally pragmatic importance. He quickly began to weave that god-awful web of string theories, giving all the dark and strange matter he had in his head. “You know, Nietzsche,” he said, “had a lot to say about that.”

“About what?” the Uberwench asked.

“What old Professor Let-Me-Speak-Slowly in there was babbling on about like a dopey doper parrot, you know?”

“What did he say?”

“Nietzsche, you see, took those old notions and squashed them like ticks beneath Plato’s pedagogy. He tore ’m up and just threw some Descartes on the wound.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Hmmm. I’ll try to clear it up. You know, it’s like Whitehead wrote about Sartre’s post-Nietzschean spatial notions, you know. I mean, PLEASE! He tried to say Sartre was just a bumbling oaf of a Boy Scout who crossed his i’s and dotted his t’s—in a wholly neutral metaphysical sense, you know. Well, along came Foucault and just brought the whole house of cards to Paris.”

“Okay, uhm....”

“Fascinating, isn’t it?”

“What were you saying about Nietzsche?”

“That, you know, there’s not much worth doing in this world, as I’m sure you know Nietzsche would’ve put it if he were sitting in a bar crying over his beer.”

“Okay, uhm....”

“Anyway, there’s the whole Kierkegaard thing that, you know, Heidegger copped a feel on, and BLAMMO! Footnote to Nietzsche.”

The girl looked at him with total joy registering like confusion on her face.

“After that, we’ve got that Jungian holistic soul menu thing that’s, again, footnote to Nietzsche.”

“What are you telling me?”

“You know, it’s like James would’ve said to Russell while they fought over the last slice of pizza. It’s all about what? Footnote to Nietzsche.”

“Wait. Hold up. Are you trying to tell me all modern philosophy’s some sort of answer to a single line from Nietzsche?”

“Yeah, you know ... I mean, he may not’ve said those exact words, but....”

“Okay, so Sartre is...?”

“Footnote to Nietzsche.”

“And the pragmatists are...?”

“Footnote to Nietzsche.”

“And you’re saying even psychiatry, Freud to Jung, is...?”

“Footnote to Nietzsche. Footnote to Nietzsche. Footnote to Nietzsche. You know?”

She smiled in a hungry way that made Fool feel like he’d won the Mexican Lottery in a Turkish bathhouse on Christmas Eve. “You know,” she said, “I think that’s actually starting to make sense in a way.”

“Sure enough. Gotta love the old philosopher’s stone.” He pointed to his head.

“Okay, but wait....”

“Yeah?”

“You didn’t say the Nietzschean idea was so nihilistic that he thought it’s ALL meaningless. Right?”

“Rope-a-dope’n dead on, Darling.”

“So, there has to be a countermovement in modern thought dedicated to finding something WORTH doing.”

“Well, you know, truth is, the answer’s right there in front of you. Something worth doing, you know. One thing made life worth living in a string bikini for old Nietzsche and, if I’m not totally off my eight-ball here, I think he traced it back to Aquinas.”

“Did you say ONE thing?”

“You bet. Footnote to Nietzsche. Et cetera, et cetera....”

“So, what is it? The one thing?”

Fool grinned like a mummy under his bandages. “Glad you asked,”

he said. “It’s blowjobs. Yes, indeed. Footnote most definitely to Nietzsche.”

Thank you, thank you. If you weren’t applauding, then scratch out the *Thank you, thank you*. If you weren’t applauding at first but after a delayed reaction or from some bizarre Oedipal guilt you’ve just begun to clap, then *STET* on the *Thank you, thank you*.

Anyway, this second excerpt is my favorite in the book, and a scene that by itself, I think, could have eliminated me from the MacSee competition. In fact, when anyone shows up at one of my occasional book signings, he—and I stress, *he*—always asks about this one scene. He wants to know if it really happened. I’ll never tell. For legal reasons mostly. The truly ingenious hack doesn’t leave a single clue who his characters might have been based on for fear some fan might get up the nerve to actually go and ask the source. I think I’ve accomplished that in *Roman à Clef*. I’m proud of myself for that, if nothing else.

So, in this scene, Fool’s idealized brother Skip relates the story of his truly heroic Argonautical night in which he golden-fleeced not one but *three* women to give him a blowjob, telling Fool after each vignette, “Was gonna fuck, but gawdamn I was tired. So she blew me.”

Chapter Five Hundred and Forty-One

[ARCHIVIST’S NOTE: *Once more in the interest of archival space on the hard disk, eight and a half pages have been omitted here. These may be found in their entirety in the author’s novel, Roman à Clef, beginning on page 946 of the First Edition. —A. B.*]

At this point many of you might be thinking my speech, as so many reviewers have written about the novel, has gone on far too long. I'll close with a writing tip that will help you and other aspiring authors strive for greatness, or so-soness, or maybe even a MacSee Award for Most Abysmal Novel of the Year. After all, to be the best writer in the world, or even to be the best at being lousy, one must learn at least a thing or two along the way. Here's my discovery, the secret to being a great writer and writing the Great American Novel, the key that unlocks our patio doors and inspires us to seek a Zen perfection in our prose. The method behind the madness of all great writing is the blowjob, or the anatomical equivalent for great or greatly terrible lady writers.

That's why I've always thought my brother Kip, had he learned the language a little better in grammar school, could've been the Shakespeare of our generation. He has an uncanny knack for acquiring blowjobs. He collects them the way some folks collect turd fossils from the Paleolithic period. He knows more about doubling down on a blowjob bet than any cocky old gambler I've met. Even at forty-four, he's still the best there is whenever he flashes his quirky grin and tosses out a laid-back laugh that seems to swear, *You need this more than me.*

Let me tell you more about Kip, who I'd say probably would be the tragic hero of *Roman à Clef*—that is, if he'd had the good fortune to die. He's got this certain magic. I marvel over it every day. Kip could be my muse if he'd just take a moment to teach me his secrets.

I remember a time....

[*LAST ARCHIVIST'S NOTE OF IMPORTANCE: The final twenty-six pages have been omitted, in part to conserve hard-disk space, but mostly because redundant, rambling stories about the*

speaker's brother receiving a particular form of sexual gratification were, the trustees concluded, not of any value to understanding the awful talent of Mulert Hobb, known by his pseudonym Rob. B. Lumeth. Should anyone take issue, the dissenter is advised to read the author's novel, Roman à Cleft, a dozen times or so. All eliminated episodes appear in one form or another in that tome. For legal considerations, it must be noted that this course of action is not suggested and certainly not encouraged by the Trustees of the Joy J. MacSee Foundation or this archivist. In other words, CAVEAT EMPTOR. Better yet, to steal a phrase from another book decent folks sincerely dread despite its cultish literary following and reverence: ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE. —A. B.]