

## ***Reading Ribald Rabelais***

Kids love insults, especially what they judge to be creative put-downs. We thought it clever to call some poor kid with acne “Pizza Face”. Kids also like scatological humour and seem to not yet have resolved the obsessions of Freud’s “Anal Period,” which according to Siggie should’ve ended before school age. The more literate among us kids revelled in new words we figured our victims wouldn’t understand. Calling somebody “Shit Face” was not nearly as satisfying as calling him a “dingleberry”, knowing he didn’t have a clue what that meant.

And of course every kid loves a story, especially a tall tale filled with outrageous and cleverly offensive language and behaviour. But where did I find such? Certainly not in the kids’ section of our local public library, the thoroughly sanitized pen that contained only the books youngsters we were allowed to sign out. Oh you could get away with browsing in the general stacks, but, at least back then, you were likely to be accosted by a stern librarian if you sat down and started reading something from the adult fiction section.

I was addicted to reading, but the only adult books in my house were a *Bible* and an old *World Book Encyclopaedia*. So the public library was a gold mine. It was true that one couldn’t keep the gleaming nuggets found there, but one could take *some* of them home to enjoy for two weeks. But at first the vast majority of the riches to be found there were forbidden to me, and this naturally only made them more appealing. Even after I’d graduated grammar school and reached whatever age it was that allowed me access to books other than Golden Books and similar pabulum, there remained a forbidden chamber within this public gold mine. The library had a locked glass cabinet, wherein were imprisoned books that only those with the highest security clearance could access. Imagine the lure these books held for a pubescent reader!

My mother approved of my reading habit and, being my indulgent mother, somehow got me full adult clearance upon my requesting it. I can’t remember how old I was or how this was arranged. I believe she, though fundamentally very honest, was quite capable of lying about my age on the application for an adult library card. However I always looked younger than my age and the librarians were very stern and suspicious. So maybe my mother just lent me hers, and I got away with saying I was signing stuff out for her. This seems possible, for kids often, when still barely old enough to go to a store, would buy smokes for our parents.

However it came to be, all I know is that one day I got full clearance, even to the glass cabinet behind the librarians’ desk, and I came home with Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantegruel*, all five volumes together in one heavy tome. I was going to discover what this forbidden treasure was like. I was *not* disappointed.

It wasn’t an easy read, for this was written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it was assumed readers could follow sentences of more than ten words. And it sure wasn’t written for a

‘juvenile’ readership, although some of the pleasures to be found within in it were certainly juvenile. Upon once again dipping into it now in my doddering, I have to wonder how much I understood beyond the most superficial level, for it is a very deeply layered work justifiably considered classic, and it is wonderfully satirical. I think its political incorrectness and vulgarity would serve as a wonderful laxative for many academic literati’s tightly puckered (to quote Rabelais) “bungles”.

I suppose what I most remember about it is the sheer, childish joy I felt when reading such scatological writing. So often this is the case with remembered experiences of reading a book: you remember the emotional response, even though you have only a vague remembrance of the stimulus responsible for it. One might fail a quiz about the most elementary features of plot or character, but our brain’s emotional circuits remember the pleasure associated with the first reading.

I particularly remember coming upon long lists of vulgar insults, which I tried to memorize to impress my friends and confound the targets of my verbal abuse. But I also tried to work in disgusting phrases in other contexts. It was always amusing to my—not surprisingly few—friends if I quietly and poetically referred to what someone had in their lunch box as “shit drenched with blossoming turds”.

This may have been the beginning of my appreciation for the so-called classics, for I realized that there was delicious forbidden fruit to be found buried in the apparently desiccated meals our teachers told us were “good for us”. In high school, they tried to convince us that Shakespeare was worth the effort—as I know they still do. But what convinced me The Bard was worth the effort certainly were *not* the alleged benefits that adding him to our diet would confer—as a sort of broccoli for the mind. It was discovering that the edition we had as a textbook was expurgated, and Shakespeare had a dirty mind. He was not as foul-mouthed as Rabelais, but there was more to these plays than met the bored eye of a high school student.

What had happened is I’d misplaced my school edition, and in a panic went to the library to get an emergency replacement, for we were supposed to have the text with us in class, and I’d already got on the wrong side of the teacher. The library edition was more annotated than the one approved by the Chicago School Board, and some of the annotations really startled me. Oh my god, there were a lot of dirty jokes, jokes that I’d been missing but were fully explained in these footnotes—footnotes mysteriously omitted from the official school edition!

A large part of Shakespeare’s genius is his ability to appeal to the full range of our emotions and to every level of intellectual sophistication. The rabble in the mosh pit of the Globe Theatre probably weren’t catching the allegorical references in *Hamlet* to the debate between Digges and Brahe about the earth’s position in the solar system, but I bet they got the Lady Luck’s private parts joke in the graveyard. When these footnotes explained the various puns and double entendres, I suddenly connected to this old guy who was supposed to be good for us.

I think it was sophomore year that our English teacher offered us some kind of bonus marks for watching Shakespearean plays then being presented on TV, presumably on a channel designated as “educational”. My friend, John, and I would get together religiously every week at his house to watch these productions—after having boned up on them with *Cliff's Notes* beforehand. I remember my favourite character was Falstaff.

So all the satisfactions that led to my addiction to literature were not those virtuous ones my teachers preached. They were far more base. It was like finding the key to a locked cabinet of *Playboy* magazines. The key was lying right there under a pile of stodgy textbooks. (Naturally discovering this dirty secret made me feel superior in one redeeming way, for I was clearly inferior when it came to social and athletic skills.) And when eventually I was old enough to actually buy *Playboy*, I honestly did so for the articles, the quality fiction, and the interviews with writers. (But I still enjoyed the beautiful, naked women and the dirty jokes. Still do.)

So the road that led me to a real appreciation of Shakespeare and my other early literary heroes was the low road. I have come to realize that truly great literature appeals to both our nobler and our baser instincts. My teachers were right when they said literature was a great way to get to come to understand human nature, but the road into this understanding for a young person is, as it probably is for many adults, the low road. The great writers, like Rabelais and Swift and Shakespeare, obviously knew this, but misguided adults put up roadblocks there, wrongly assuming the young will then automatically take the high road. Usually, however, young people just give up on the journey.

I am eternally grateful to my mother for that adult library card. And to Rabelais and all his ilk.

From *Freezing Fire* by Ken Stange (a work-in-progress)