All the Critics Love U in New York



If there's any celebrity you can be sure you *did not know* in any significantly real way, it was Prince. Shape shifter, name shifter/eraser, master of every style you can name. Intensely private and essentially flamboyant. Exhibitionist. Hermit. You don't know him except in the ways you think you do, and that has as much to do with what you wanted him to be as it does with which little pieces of mythologizing he wanted you to see at any given time. Like the classic Trickster of legend, he could present multiple faces at the same time, and the face you got to glimpse, briefly, depended on which side of the road you were standing on. If Prince had been around then, Kurosawa could have made this pint-sized product of Minni-freaking-sota the centerpiece of *Rashomon*. That would have been cool.

What do I know of Prince? We're roughly the same age. He's probably the most under-appreciated guitar player in like ever. Over the years that I have been heralding him as easily the best thing since Hendrix and sliced bread I've received more than a few puzzled looks and dismissive chuckles about me just being a contrarian. This week, many people were surprised when Billy Gibbons described his playing as "sensational".

But even that is only a piece of it. From his textbook knowledge and respect for those who came before him – JB, Sly, Jimi, Miles, George Clinton, &c. – to his savage dance chops and ultra-sharp fashion sense, to his early adoption and

mastery of technologies like the Linn Drum; the guy put a package together that was both historically intelligent and, somehow, way out in front of the coming surge of hip-hop and Michael Jackson/Madonna style pop that followed him by a few years. The man had his gifts. Add in an almost incomprehensible work ethic, and you have Prince.

How Prince helped me know myself comes down to this simple question:

How could anyone possibly fail to recognize such evident talent?

Probably the way that I did.

Because instead of listening, I reacted to the packaging cues that came with the Prince product. And because he hit the scene in the late 70s with a funky beat, puffy shirts, lots of synthesizers, and a (deceptively) silly reliance on lyrics about fucking, I saw him clearly for what he was: just another callow Disco Boy, a Travolta, a Bee Gee.

It's hard to remember (or, if you are a little younger, comprehend) the degree to which DiscoSux fever encompassed the world of funky music. Earth, Wind & Fire, James Brown, P-Funk: all these and more took their share of unfriendly fire from people who were essentially painting the entirety of black popular music as beneath-contempt shit.

DiscoSux fever was a symptom of reaction against gay and minority encroachment into the historically masculine world of rock and pop. This music was aimed at gender-fluid communities and urban black folk. For a generation of mostly white, hetero-norm critics and fans for whom rock'n'roll equaled priapic guitar stroking and golden-maned Dionysi sporting socks stuffed into spandex trousers, this was music that threatened the natural order. <fn>The pulse belonged on the 1 and 3, dammit, none of this 2 and 4 backbeat shit. Whaddya, Disco Duck?</fn> It was outsider art storming the

academy. And I was a privileged, by-birth member of the patriarchal academy, though I didn't even know that such a thing existed; such is the blindness of by-birth membership.

Prince said fk all that noise, and it was pretty clear that he was throwing down on, well, people like me.

> *Look out all you hippies, you ain't as sharp as me*
> *It ain't about the trippin', but the sexuality*
> *— All the Critics Love U in New York*

Hey. I resemble(d) that remark.

So I could "listen" to *When Doves Cry* or *1999* and quickly sort this alleged genius off into the "just another over-hyped fraud" bin.

In that same song, this upstart had the nerve to sing:

> *It's time for a new direction*
> *It's time for jazz to die*

As a burgeoning jazz-bo, I tooks what I tooks and it was more than I could takes. I didn't need to hear the music behind this pixie poppinjay. These crude insults told me all I needed to know! Pistols at dawn!

Later, when Miles compared him to Duke Ellington and Chopin, it was easy to dismiss the comments as Miles trying to glom onto the popularity of the younger phenom. Because come on: he's really just another Disco Boy, and everybody knows that DiscoSux, so pass the bong and cue up some Coltrane or some real rock'n'roll. Dude.

One night in 1993 I watched a terrific Neil Young *Unplugged* on MTV<fn>In those days, children, the M stood for "Music". You can look it up!</fn>. The next show was Prince live in some mega-arena, and I watched it and thought, "Meh, pretty

good” and then he walked offstage and into a limo that took him somewhere and he walked into a small club and took the stage and proceeded to melt my face with a yellow guitar and the most scorching Hendrix-style blues I’d heard since before Stevie Ray died. For the next hour I was slain. I’ve been listening to Prince ever since.

So what does the phenomenon of Prince teach me about myself? Every time I hear his music, even as I am digging it down to my toes, I am reminded that I am a fallible human being, prone to unpleasant bigotries and prejudices that cause me to stop paying attention to what is real and true. The impulses that put me on auto-piloting sort mode – this person is this, that music is that, I don’t like “those” kinds of people/music/movies/food/&c. – are the things that make me miss the My Favorite Worldness of life. It’s good to have a ready reminder – one that the iPod throws up randomly and often – that for all my pretense to erudition and discernment and such like, I am just as likely to react like a dope as I am to apply any kind of intentional awareness to, well, anything.

Which means, naturally, that any opinion I hold is inherently suspect and worthy of re-examination. Consider yourself duly warned.

The most delicious part of the irony is that the song I quote above, had I bothered to listen to it in 1983, would have delivered exactly the kind of face-melting guitar heroics that won me over ten years later. Check it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJxt_Ey6tbo

Who knows? I was full of myself in those days<fn>Unlike now, when I am extremely humble and enlightened.</fn>, so I might have dismissed it anyway.

Thanks, Artist Who Formerly Bestrode The World as Prince.

Somehow, having you be the constant reminder of my proclivity to dopiness ain’t all that bad. You sexy motherfker.

The Wheel Turns



At the end of the Civil War, the United States assumed ownership of Robert E. Lee’s family plantation, high on a hill in Arlington, just across the river from the Nation’s – the unified nation’s – capitol. The family home remains, but the grounds of that plantation, a place where hundreds of slaves worked and died, became the final resting place for more than 15,000 dead Union soldiers.<fn>This ranks among the finest and most appropriate nose-rubbings in American history, and dog knows we have a history nose-rubbings both noble and ig.</fn> One hundred fifty years later, the body count approaches half a million.<fn>It is a bitter pill that, as the cemetery expanded to fit all the fallen, a large community or freedmen was evicted to make room for more corpses.</fn>

The first memory I have of Arlington is a Spring Break trip there with my Dad to visit the memorial marker for his younger brother, a Top Gun pilot who died in a training run in 1964. This visit was c. 1973, near the end of the Vietnam War. There was something about the way the geometry of

all the grave sites shifted as you moved down the road that made it look infinite. And it occurred to my callow self, all of 14 years old, that every white dot was a dead soldier. A guy just like my dead uncle. And somehow the horror that I had never registered through years of watching Vietnam carnage on teevee landed with a careening thud. And I remember this horrific, engulfing sadness, mingled with a concern that I was going to start crying, sobbing – in front of my dad! – and how could I possibly save myself from such embarrassment, so my horror and fear mixed into this massive spaghetti ball of empathy for the victims and fear of shame for myself, which I managed to escape by stuffing my feelings down the way well raised males of a certain age know all too well.

What I didn't know is that my dad took my picture while this internal riot was raging. It has hung in his (every) home ever since. Did he know?

Every time I've visited since then, the massive horror of the place envelops me. I am angry. I see the grand monuments of the generals and admirals, the ostentatious stones and crosses planted for the men who sent the rest of that half-million mostly forgotten horde to mostly senseless slaughter. I am no fan of war, no admirer of military "might". Much of what the National Cemetery represents is senseless waste, cock-strutting ego. It is evidence of a madness that is evidently irresistible to many who gain power.

But somehow, there is always an overwhelming sense of awe and serenity, a presence of commitment and memoriam that I've experienced only a handful of times.

Nothing rings that bell more than the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Today found me – 43 years after my father brought me to Arlington for the first time – bringing my own son to Arlington. It's our first day of a Spring Break romp through American History, a subject that we both enjoy. As we walked

into the grounds, I felt the tingle. This place just gets to me. We wandered past the Kennedy flame and on up the hill to the historic Lee home. Every few minutes, a thundering boom of commemorative cannon fire or the crack of rifle shots broke the silence. Apparently, there are upwards of two dozen interments every week day. The gravedigger's job is never finished.

We had time to stroll. The markers were often unintentionally funny. Many higher-ranking officers had their wives buried next to them, their stone reading simply "wife". This "wife" had a name, that one didn't. Best monument of all: a Navy Admiral whose stone specified "And His Second Wife", a last gasp middle-finger extended from the beyond toward wife #1, who must have really been a piece of work to deserve such an enduring "ah fanabla".

Clouds of gunpowder smoke hung over the hills. And despite the fact that there was a considerable crowd of all-American event-attenders, there was none of the antic quality tourist crowds bring to almost every other "point of interest". Even the kids we'd watched using the Metro hang straps like monkeys somehow knew to dial it down.

As we approached the Tomb, the silence grew deeper. It was crowded. One small child was crying, but his Dad – a Marine by the looks of his t-shirt and hat – lifted him gently and carried him out. A few minutes later, both were back. Quiet.

The Honor Guard upheld the ritual that has been played out thousands of times. Twenty-one steps to the south. Heel click. Twenty-one second pause. Turn to the east. Click. Twenty-one second pause. Turn north. Click. Twenty-one second pause. Shift rifle from the east shoulder to the west shoulder. Twenty-one steps north. Click. Turn to the east. Repeat.

There is an honor guard on duty 365/24/7. Whatever the weather. Last time I was there, it was New Year's day c. 1992

or 3. It was very cold, like skin cracking cold. Because my Dad has a family pass, we were able to drive directly to the Tomb. We were the only people there aside from the guard. It was grey, damp, windy. We lasted about 20 minutes, just long enough to watch the Changing of the Guard. It was a solemn, precise ritual. There was no audience for this aside from three of us. It didn't matter. They do this in the rain, the snow, in the dead of night. Twenty-one steps, twenty-one seconds. Over and over.

Ritual. Commitment. Memoriam.

So as the Changing ritual began today, we – like everyone who witnesses it – we rose to our feet. We held our hands over our hearts whenever active military would offer a full salute. The Changing was immutable, constant, reliable. A few cannon shot echoed from another ceremony.

And then, through no good planning on our part, we found ourselves witnessing an expanded ceremony, this one a wreath-laying ritual with an extra guard and musician. Four high school students "helped" the guard place a new wreath in front of the tomb. Another guard laid the previous wreath at the base of the Tomb.

All this was happening under the stern command of Master Sergeant Calderon, a truly formidable presence with a voice that demanded attention. But where we stood, we heard the other side: a gentle man, a gentleman, who softly explained to the teens exactly what to do and when to do it. The modulation from fierce to tender was precise and – really, the only word I can call up – genuine.

I was feeling misty-eyed, taken by all the sadness and beauty of 150 years worth of dead children – because truly, most of the bodies here never saw two dozen winters. A bugler presented. A robin – the first of the spring? – flew from left to right across the Tomb site. And the first notes of Taps, a

crystalline tone borne on angel's breath, took me. Flow my tears.

In the distance, a formation of fighter jets were coming up the river. I thought it a nice coincidence, here they come, nice coincidence, hey they're flying right over us and there goes the third jet, peeling away from the formation up into the sky until the clouds swallowed it and it was gone, the traditional tribute to the missing man. I don't think any of us were even breathing at this point. And then, the extra players marched away, leaving the lone guard with his incessant count of twenty-one, twenty-one.

It turned out the flyover was for another ceremony on the grounds. Life and death go on. Some of the dead are sent away with cannon shot. Some get rifles hoisted and fired. And some, no doubt grandees of military renown, still have the juice to garner a quick flyover of four billion dollar airplanes.

(Ed Note: Pal of i2b DD points out that the flyover was more likely for a deceased pilot, perhaps even a Top Gun like mon oncle, and not (his words) "some brass monkey". Duly noted.)

As we walked away from the Tomb, we saw a horse-drawn hearse roll by. We followed it for a bit, then realized it had already discharged its coffin load, so we wandered back towards the exit, across the Memorial Bridge that leads to the Lincoln Memorial, a bridge that aspirationally exemplifies the rapprochement of Union and Confederacy that, somehow, remains as salient a divide today as it was that day at Appomattox. Son stopped at one point and wondered if the President might sometimes visit this place after closing, just to get a reminder of the awesome power he holds. All these lives. The weight of responsibility must be – one can only hope – truly terrifying.

We crossed the river and wandered to the front of the Lincoln, one of my favorite places, with the idea that we would read

the Gettysburg Address and add some resonance to the day's experience. But the steps were mobbed with event-attenders in full flight, and Son refused to climb the steps, refused to even look up at the statue of Abe, preferring to wait for a chance to see it when the proper reverence was at play. Smart boy. We'll go back after dark one night.



The Boy, Considering: I sent this pic to my Dad. My guess is that it made him misty-eyed. Whaddya gonna do?

Field Tested Fool Proof Granola



Posted this almost exactly a year ago. I've been making at least a batch of granola a week since then, and today finds me making a couple of batches for holiday gifting. Seemed a good time to share this one again. BTW, the Bitter Southerner has a new Best Of list up for 2015. Check it out.

Field Tested Fool Proof Granola

Looking for an activity that'll cure what ails you? Cook something.

Alas, my kitchen chops are just enough to keep me from starving, and to get myself in trouble once in a while, but there are a few go-to recipes that keep me from being a cliched, *Leave It To Beaver* era patriarchal putz.<fn>There are plenty of other areas where I qualify, but I'm nearly redeemable on this score.</fn> If you are generally kitchen savvy, this post is likely beneath your notice, save as an opportunity to point and laugh as I wobble on toddler legs through the world of food.

This one is an amalgam of lots of different granola recipes I've made/bungled/burned over the years. I've finally learned the guiding principles, though, and now I can whip this out at a moment's notice, as long as I have all the ingredients:



Oatmeal – 4 cups

Sunflower seeds – 1 cup

Flax seeds – ½ cup

Coconut flakes – 1 cup

Tupelo Honey – ¾ cup (any other sweetener will do, but this is my fave)

Vegetable Oil – ½ cup

Salt – A couple two three pinches

Vanilla extract – A scoche

Then, if you're like me, you'll realize you forgot something, so off to the market to get:



Pecans – 1 cup chopped

Dried fruit – A fistful (cranberries today). DO NOT put the dried fruit in the oven or they will turn to stone.



Mix all the dry ingredients (except the dried fruit!!) in a big pan. You can substitute or add any kinds of seeds or nuts, but if you add much more than I use, you might want to add another cup of oats to keep the granola from becoming too seedy. Add the salt, oil, honey, and vanilla. Then stir like crazy. I use a pan with high side walls because I’m clumsy and spill a lot otherwise.

Put the mix in a 300* oven for 30 minutes. Make another pot of coffee after SOMEONE drank the rest of the first pot.<fn>I’m not naming names.</fn>

At the 30 minute mark, pull the pan out and stir well. Put it back in for another 15 minutes or so. Keep your eyes and nose peeled for any hint of burning.



After 15 minutes, or around the time your kitchen begins to smell like heaven's garden, take it out and stir again. Let cool for a while, stirring occasionally. Once it cools, add a fistful of dried fruit <fn>Exactly, no more or less. Be precise.</fn> and stir it in.

That's it. If I can do it, any prat can make it work. Half a cup of this mixed with a half cup of yogurt makes this My Favorite World.

Today's Music

This morning, Bitter Southerner posted their 25+1 favorite CDs to come out of the South in 2014.<fn>I wrote this last week, so the date's off.</fn> With just a couple of exceptions, I had not heard of the musicians on the list. So I pulled one up to provide the soundtrack for granola wrangling: Curtis Harding's *Soul Power.*

An ATL-based guitarist/singer, Harding serves an updated take on one of my favorite styles – late 60s/early 70s soul and R&B. Isley, Curtis Mayfield, Issac Hayes, Al Green…not that he *sounds just like* any of these folks, but that you can feel the through-line from the pioneers up to more recent R&B authenticos like Prince and Cee Lo. (Harding was in Cee Lo's band for a while.) He also reflects the great blues vibe of Muddy Waters and the like. And then comes "Cruel World" to wrap things up and I'm reminded of Los Lobos and the great guitar of David Hidalgo. All in all, I really love it. Just one more surprise puzzle piece that fits right into MFW. I'm sure it made the granola more better.

And now we're into Amy Ray's *Goodnight Tender*. I've met Amy in passing a few times<fn>Not that she'd have any reason to remember.</fn> and she's truly one of the world's good people. Loving this album, a heaping helping of pure country. And all respect for the incred harmonies that pal Kelly Hogan is dropping here. M. F. W.

I'm looking forward to checking out the whole list, especially the latest Lucinda Williams, whom I adore, yes I do. And if you don't know the Bitter Southerner, get to know them. They provided more than a little bit of inspiration for establishing this here little bloggy vineyard.

Jobz Are Us: The Ethical Dilemmata of the Humble

Scrivener



Toiling away here in the bloggy vineyard, Your Narrator finds himself in near-constant search of gainful, remunerative scribbling. Oh sure, regaling the tens of loyal ***i2b*** followers with insight, pith<fn>Yeth. Pith.</fn>, and *tres bon mots* in return for your undying adulation is all the reward an inky wretch could hope for. But the family has this annoying tendency to, you know, eat, so I expose my tender talents to the cruel world in hopes that someone will toss a few shekls my way.<fn>That Donate button over to the right has not brought the expected riches, needless to say.</fn> <fn>The mere mention of which – the Donate button, that is – is of course, a classic example of shameless whoring, one which allows the reader a choice between casting judgement on Your Narrator or of empathizing with his plight.</fn> <fn>And, also too, this mentioning – re: the judgement v. empathy conflict – potentially instantiates a *frisson* of guilt in the freeloading reader, which pointing out represents a further, and perhaps more pathetic, instance of Narratory whoring.</fn>

So I troll, I dig. I hustle. And occasionally, I am rewarded beyond my wildest dreams when I find an inducement like this:

> *Do you love essential oils? Do you love to write about them and take pictures?*
> *[….] Essential Oil company is looking for someone who is passionate and knowledgeable about essential oils. We currently have a blog and we are looking to add guest editors/bloggers to our mix. Will will pay per post which will need to include general information about essential*

> *oils, DIY projects, recipes or other ideas. Posts must include images.*

The photo at the top accompanies this hustle, which appeared on Craigslist,<fn>Pro tip. Job ads on Craigslist are maximum sketchy.</fn> I love this: in itself, it appears to have been written by a 7-year old ESL student. “Will will pay…” But scoreboard! They realize they need a writer!<fn>A plight more common that most would think, and one that goes unrepaired despite the glut of folks like me who stand at the ready to make your communications shine!</fn> <fn>Too much hard sell? Sorry, got a little over enthused.</fn>

Further, its appeal to the aspirant writer’s *passion* for essential oils bears all the earmarks of a near-empty paycheck for the writer’s work. Come for the oil! Stay for the love! Plus, photography!!!

Really, Your Narrator chortled heartily at this one, not even needing to get into the 4th grade trick of mis-attaching the modifier in a way that throws shade as to which is truly *essential* in their minds: the oil or the blogger.<fn>Fun fact: if you are picky and priggish about language and its (mis)use, you will never find yourself unamused in our culture. You may also never find yourself invited to parties and the like. Is that trade-off worth it?</fn>

But this is far from the funniest/oddest job description I’ve ever heard. Travel back through the misty clouds to last fall….

The result of a hot tip, I found myself a-phone with a marketing agency that specializes in providing ghost-bloggers/tweeters for various publishers and their author list. This allows the tormented author of *belle lettristic* masterpieces (as well as authors of, let us say, non-*bl* titles) to maintain a daily presence on the Internet tubes as a witty, friendly, ‘hey-I’m-your-old-pal here sharing recipes

and anecdotes and asides as I take frequent (up to ten a day) breaks from my *bl* and/or non-*bl* musings', when in fact, a writer working under deadline, regardless of the relative *bl* and/or non-*bl* merits of the work, definitely does not have surplus time/wit/inclination for such base-level whoring.<fn>That's for guys like me!</fn> Thus does it fall to schlockingly underpaid ghost writers to maintain the illusion of your favorite author as an active and engaged *pal* with her readers, when in fact, she is likely cranking out sub-mid-list potboilers at a rate that would have made Elmore Leonard quail.

And let's go ahead and get out of the way any illusion re: the *bl* and/or non-*bl* divide. The authors/titles are decidedly down the prestige meter here; we're not talking anyone/thing you'd likely read about in the NYRB or NYTBR. In fact, what we had in this case was a stable of ghost-writers churning out mass-pulp fiction under specific trade names, kind of like the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* titles of my youth, but without quite as much class.

So, here I am, spinning myself as the perfect fit for the job of ghost-writing social media *content* for someone who does not exist but is rather being made manifest by a gaggle of scribblers who, like myself, are ghost-writing for some *nom de plume* who does not really exist.<fn>This delightfully meta recursion could go on forever, like one of those Nam June Paik installations with video cameras and monitors replicating into infinity. Could I get so many (imaginary) authors assigned to me that I would have to sub out the daily Intertubes witticisms to yet another level of people pretending to be someone pretending to be a person who does not exist anywhere other than a book catlague?</fn> <fn>Even more challenging: assuming the level of one's persona-creating prowess – maybe even to the point where you've really devised some seriously recognizable and individuated character traits and proclivities for these authors who do not truly exist – would

one also be able to deploy the epic juggling chops one would need to keep each of the various non-extant "people" sorted out in one's daily creation of "witty, friendly, 'hey-I'm-your-old-pal here" dispatches, or would eagle-eyed readers be able to detect your various fabricated personae bleeding one into another, thereby undermining the, not integrity, no, but the structural resilience of the whole facade. Say it with me, people, this thing is getting fraughter by the minute.</fn>

It turned out that this agency had two specific clients. One is a publisher of potboilerish steampunk thrillers, but, said the agency rep, they had plenty of people to keep that social media illusion rolling. The other publisher, said the rep, presented a little more of a challenge, and this is where she hoped I "might be able to help, but, ah, it is, well, a little delicate."

Interest engaged! Do tell, what is this mystery challenge?

> *Please don't be offended…*

Offended? Damn, I'm dying to find out! Tell me, tell me, please!

> *…but how would you feel about ghost blogging for authors of gay male erotic fiction?*

Ya gotta admit: as job-related questions go, this beats out even a gold standard like "Do you love essential oils?" by a country mile.

You would have been proud of Your Narrator. He was silky, unruffled, and decidedly unoffended. This was some kind of challenge. Could I do it? Who knew? So I exuded that reliable and unearned confidence that served me in good stead all these years.

> *Yeah, I'm pretty sure I could handle that. I love new*

> *challenges. But you should know that I'm a 30-year married hetero with two kids.*

There was a relieved sigh at the other end of the line (apparently, the agency rep<fn>Who, as it happened, was breast-feeding her child during our call, a fact that she had shared early on in our telephonic relationship for reasons that were not completely clear. But I don't judge. I was likely in boxers at the time, myself, though there was no human creature attached to me.</fn> had borne the brunt of more than a few churchy/homophobic rants), and she said:

> *That's ok. Most of the authors aren't gay, anyway. In fact, most of them are straight women.*

I allowed that this was a fascinating tidbit. Please, do go on.

> *Yeah, in fact, we did some market research and discovered that 85% of all our sales were to married women between the ages of 40-55. Almost all of the authors fall in that group, too.*

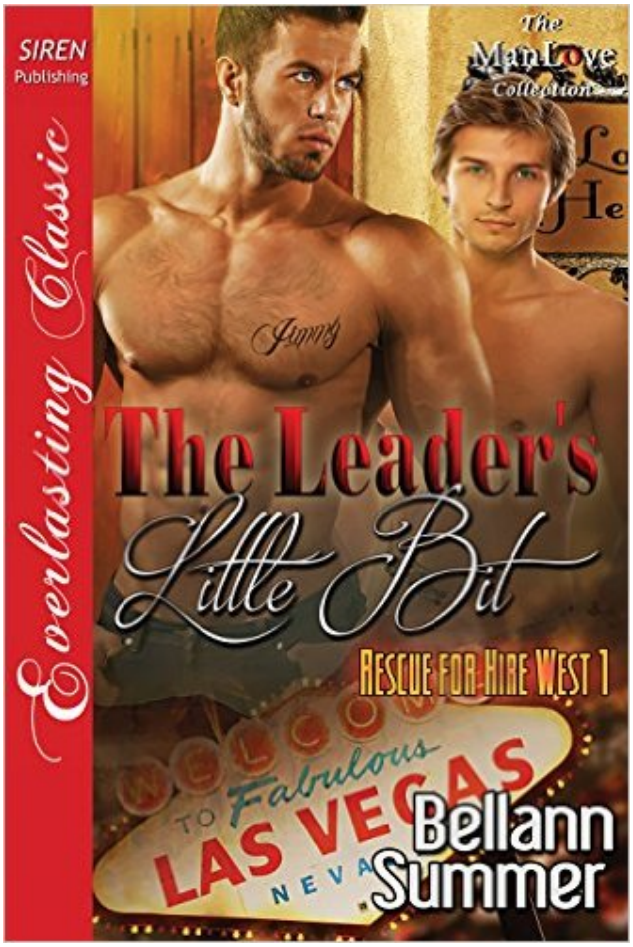
You know what they say (and of course, *they* are always right): You can't make this shit up.

So to re-cap: the job was to provide ghost writing services to authors who were in fact ghost writers themselves, writers pretending to be differently gendered *and* gay; straight women writing pornography (excuse, erotica) about man-on-man/men encounters for other straight women. And my role was to execute the friendly/witty/your-good-pal online personae to provide the so-called authors' fans with a sense of connection one-to-the-other. I believe this is a situation for which the word *simulacrum* was specifically coined.

I did not get the gig. I guess things were already confused

enough without dropping an aging, hetero, patriarchal penis person into the mix.

So next time you are spot a book like this, keep this little tale in mind. It may not be quite what you think. Or, if you are a married woman between the ages of 40-55, it might be exactly what you think.



This is not from the publisher in question, but it is pretty representative of the title list I saw.

Who needs a Jade Helm conspiracy when this kind of thing is going on?

My. Favorite. World.