

Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #1



SPOILER ALERT: Mad Men Season 7 spoilers below.

One of the best novels I've ever read is almost at an end. This book sits on a list that includes *Les Miserables*, *Infinite Jest*, *Catch-22*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*. Yeah, programs from the electric picture radio make the list. Wanna make something of it? If I were to include short story collections, I'd mention *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*, Chekhov, and Raymond Carver.

Last night I watched the 3rd-to-last episode of *Mad Men*, and out of seven seasons, that image above is one of the most evocative and cool and resonant and hallucinatory and plain badass moments of the entire book. The bare bones of the abandoned SC&P office; the closest thing left we have to play the grand patriarch, albeit thinly represented; and Peggy of our Heart casting it all to the wind, drunk and roller skating through the ruins as Roger plays *Hi-Lili, Hi Lo* on a cheesy organ – the whole sequence felt like that revelatory acid trip moment where you *really, really see, man*.

Roger, the Pale King, grants the princess in disguise a token of power from the One True Patriarch in the form of an antique Japanese porn print (Lear and Ran meeting nicely). Peggy recoils; *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* is not the kind of art a nice Catholic girl would hang in her office.



Peg is an ace copy writer, or as we prefer to be known, cunning linguists.

And then, the best piece of Roger-Peggy dialog in the whole damn book:

“You know I need to make men feel at ease,” she says.

“Who the hell told you that?” Roger replies.

Who told her that? Joan, the dethroned Queen Bee, back in the very first episode – 7 years ago in our time, 10 years ago in Mad Men time. Peg takes this advice to heart, this blessing of the dwindling patriarch to go and be as badass as she can muster. And while I thought I’d never enjoy an image of Peg as much as the drunken roller skating, I was wrong. Here we see her here striding the halls of McCann like a colossus, brandishing her cigarette and Asian porno like a sword and shield.



Warrior Princess

This is a woman who has run out of fucks to give, and who has the internal strength to not have to give them anymore. The sequence plays beautifully, rendered in slow-mo as the white collar drones stumble over their feet trying to get out of her way.

Like the best books of my life, I want *Mad Men* to slow down as we approach the end. I can't wait to find out how it ends. Though given their history of landing the biggest blows 2-3 episodes *before* the season finales, we may already know. For example: Joan told Peg in the first episode years ago to defer to men; she now knows she doesn't need to. I think it means we've seen the last of Peggy. She's done here., but I also can't stand the idea that we won't get to follow the characters beyond the final page. Not that I want anything to do with sequels, prequels, spin-offs, board games, *Mad Men*-labeled scotch or filterless cigs, &c.

And yeah, it's a novel. It's as textured and considered and layered as any great novel. People have derided it as nothing more than a soap opera, as though many of the greatest pieces of literature don't also fit that

description.<fn>Paging Emma Bovary and Countess Olenska.</fn>

There are more fully realized characters here than in most great novels, and more than a few secondary characters rendered with greater depth and sympathy than most books/movies/ tv shows can muster for their central players. The detail accorded fashion and cultural context are damned near encyclopedic, on par with Hugo's description of the Paris sewers or DeLillo's shot heard round the world baseball game chapter in *Underworld*.

One thing *Mad Men* delivered that's really striking is the sense that, even when characters are not on-screen for weeks (or years!) at a time, when they re-appear we get the sense that they have actually been *living* the whole time they were away. This is an impressive achievement, and one that not many of our favorite novels can deliver.<fn>e.g., even the implacable Javert seems to have been sitting on a shelf whenever we are not with him on the page.</fn>

And maybe even more pertinent to Your Narrator: I know these people. I lived in the NY suburbs during this period. My Dad was a marketing exec, right at the edge of the Madison Avenue gaggle. I recognize the bosses, the underlings, the sycophants. I know the secretaries whose job description included remembering the boss's kids' birthdays; to recognize their voice on the phone; to 'take care' of us when we visited the skyscrapers at inconvenient moments. I wore the pajamas that kid wore, and I had some of the same toys, and the houses looked that way, and the moms and dads acted that way. The clothes and cars and hairstyles and music all changed the way we see it unfold in this book.

And then one day, they sit you down and tell you that mommy and daddy aren't going to live together anymore, but don't worry because nothing really is going to change and they both still love you very much and the earth opens up because you know it's sugar-coated bullshit even if you're too young to

even know that word.



That's me, second from the left. I swear I had that same shirt.

Don: "I'm not going, I'll just be living elsewhere..."

Sally: "That's GOING, you say things and you don't mean them, you can't just do that!"

I can attest to the veracity of the dialogue, the setting, the emotion, the whole package. No cluster of words on a page has ever devastated me more than watching this scene of this "soap opera" on the idiot box. I don't remember any printed words causing me to explode into broken-hearted sobbing like this one.<fn>The death of Gavroche Thénardier on the barricades caused me to burst into tears. But no heart-tearing sobs.</fn> (For that matter, I rarely laugh out loud while reading, but often do so while watching tv or movies.<fn>That Your Narrator may be an unwashed Philistine is a question disposed of quickly. He most certainly washes.</fn>)

So does the electric picture radio matter? Since I casually

name-dropped Emma earlier, let's hear from her on the delights of reading:

"You forget everything. The hours slip by. You travel in your chair through centuries you seem to see before you, your thoughts are caught up in the story, dallying with the details or following the course of the plot, you enter into characters, so that it seems as if it were your own heart beating beneath their costumes."

Television at its best delivers the same experience. Sure, it serves up some weak sauce, but we don't let Bulwer-Lytton or 50 Shades of Grisham keep us from the pleasures of [insert your favorites here]. The long-form format – especially on cable – enables stories that can contain Tony Soprano and Omar and Al Swearingen and Frank Pembleton, with characters and storylines that put to rest any argument that television cannot be as profound and *literary* as books.

It's a fair bet that I'll write more about *Mad Men* as time goes by. I'm going to take a break for a while and then re-read it, just like my other favorite novels.

**Material. Timing. Delivery.
And the beauty of random
disregard.**



Life is busy and such, mostly in ways good. But one must never disregard the wisdom of Miss ~~Latella~~ Rosannadana.

(Ed Note: Eagle-eyed reader Popopopovich correctly points out that it was in fact Rosanna Rosanadanna who made famous the “It’s always something” catchphrase. The management apologizes for any inconvenience and begs forbearance of the litigious demons of the Gilda Radner Estate.<fn>Worse than Disney, I hear.</fn> The Writer has been put on a strict diet of gruel made from the ground up bones of our recently departed fact-checker. We regret the error.)

It’s always something.

In the past two weeks...two biopsies to try and figure out why my aching Studebaker of a body continues to drop parts despite the mechanics’ best efforts. The first: mostly negative (yay!) but inconclusive as to another one of those melodramatic ‘C’ word diagnoses. Results of the latest test due Friday. I expect good news, as most of my symptoms have disappeared untreated. Go figger.<fn>And I still cannot grip a guitar, and fk that shit, Rupert.</fn>

In the meantime, Awesome Daughter is expecting news about whether her first choice college welcomes her with open arms. Decision day is Friday. Well.

Yesterday, as she was asking for a favor, she demurred at pushing too hard, because (her words) “you’re dealing with that whole cancer thing.” I laughed so hard I thought I’d plotz. And of course, she won her request. Comedy is all about material, timing, and delivery. A-plus on all fronts.

This evening, we were all laughing about her remark.<fn>Graveyard whistling and disregard for solemnity being big around these parts.</fn> Son declared her horrible. I declared him my favorite, as one is always well-advised to encourage sycophancy from the underlings.

Then it struck me: a thought experiment!<fn>I've been reading the latest Daniel Dennett. My puzzlers are not nearly as profound, but I aver to the inspiration.</fn>

A family awaits two pieces of news of critical importance. Only one response can be positive. Do you, daughter, wish me to be cancer-free, or do you wish to be accepted to your dream school?

Zero hesitation from my (truly) loving and wonderful child:

College acceptance. Cancer is treatable.

A moment of WTF was that pause, and then we all fell down laughing.

Material was a tad off center, but the timing and delivery was pure Coltrane. Brava.

Also, too, in the realm of casual disregard...

The bloggy vineyard of i2b attracts a steady parade of eyeballs, but few of the humans bother to leave comments. This makes me very sad.<fn>Try to hear that phrase in the icy teutonic accent of Heidi Klum dismissing a Project Runway contestant for bad taste.</fn>

So, dear reader, your random disregard leads me to bask in the warming glow of nothing but spambot generated comments intended to entice me to purchase sports jerseys, weight loss supplements, and penis enhancers.<fn>Aside from the jerseys, none of that stuff is for real. Believe me.</fn> But I've come to love some of these simplistic machine friends, as their comments serve to encourage continued blogularity.<fn>And to

stimulate my tumescence for under the medically recommended four-hour maximum.</fn> To wit:

What i don't understood is in reality how you are not actually a lot more neatly-appreciated than you may be right now. You are so intelligent. You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga! Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!

Damn right, registered user Tanya3756dc from Uzbekistan. And thanks for the shout out.

There are two kinds of these auto-messages. One is dry, written in impeccably poor language, and offering nothing but commercial enticement. But such feeble witterings are not sufficient for my dear Tanya3765dc. These comments find art in the strangest places.

You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga!

A shrewd judge of literary merit is my Tanya3765. Indeed, does not Girl Gaga make the world go 'round? Mais bien sur! Even Cole Porter knew that!

Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!

You bet your sweet Uzbekian bippy, Tanya. My individual stuffs excellent, as legions far and wide will attest.

But more critically, my beloved Tanya3765, despite her

automated disposition and limited linguistic facility, has arrived at the existential core of Immune to Boredom:

At all times care for it up.

Amen, Sister Tanya3765. Amen.

And one last thing...

I watched *Casablanca* for around the 75th time last night. I was really just going to watch for a minute, but one thing led to Sam and Ilsa and *Les Marseilles* and "Shocked, shocked I say!" and I was done for. And while I always choke up at the big moments and miss subtleties because goddammit the problems of two people don't amount to a hill of beans in this world and we'll always have Paris, and therefore I'm a helpless heap incapable of critical scrutiny...what I realized in watching this time was: there is not one wasted word, frame, musical note in this movie. Every cut, every aside, every casual glance at the side of the scene contributes to a deeper story.

Try to think of more than a few works of art that achieve this superb economy.

You think the great works of Dickens or Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy might not have benefited from a little judicious pruning? How about *Lawrence of Arabia*, or even Billy the Bard's plays? Oh, how they do go on!

Even my favorite book of ever, the infinite *Infinite Jest*...even that epic could probably have lost a word or 5000 and suffered nothing from the loss.<fn>Though I would not be the one to cut even a punctuation mark from that one.</fn>

I bring this point to bear for two reasons.

One, *Casablanca* may just be a perfect piece of art. Consider it. The story is timeless. The material is poetry. The delivery and timing, utterly majestic.

Two: however perfect the movie may be as an example of aesthetic precision and efficiency, this blog post stakes out the opposite pole as an exemplar of free-floating random and discursive disregard.

Mea culpa. This shit don't write itself.

Here's looking at you, kid.



**It's the Worst Time in the
History of Ever. (And it**

always has been.)



The *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program*, aka the Senate CIA Torture Report, is a legalistic *summary* of the Torture committed in our name during the post-9/11 War on Terror, matter-of-fact descriptions of acts that, whatever enhanced euphemism we use to mask the truth, are acts of Torture.

Torture.

Let that word hang there like an indelible shit stain.

Stick your hand in it, rub it in on your clothes. Don't worry, you won't have any new stink there that wasn't there before. This is America, where hideous violence on your behalf has been the name of the game for well over 200 years. Don't be shy. There's plenty of stink to go around.

Because also in the news: multiple summary executions of citizens by law enforcement, including a 12-year old boy who was romping on a playground across the street from his house. The police fatally shot him within 3 seconds of getting out of their car. Because reasons.

Because also: the State of Georgia executed a man with the functional intelligence of an 9-year old – an African American represented at trial by a knee-walking drunk who was also a racist and embezzler. Because Justice.

Because also: the movement to make the 2nd Amendment the primary ruling principle of our civic lives has led to, yet

again, a mentally unstable person opening fire on students at a school. And oh, because also, a prominent member of the Open Carry movement shot her husband and daughter. Newtown, two years ago today. It was a teachable moment, remember? Because Freedom. The better to keep us safe.

And nobody seems the least bit surprised. Upset, for a minute, but unsurprised. Now, what's on the teevee?

Welcome to the New Normal. But really, what's new about it?

"Violence is as American as cherry pie". H Rap Brown dropped that one on an America that had not come to grips with the contradiction between its self-image and its true history.<fn>That America being, largely, White America, naturally. Non-whites were all too familiar with the legacy.</fn> I'm just old enough to remember the tut-tut reactions of parents and teachers, people who were outraged at the suggestion that violence is at the very core of our heritage.

At least they had the decency to be horrified at the thought. Because what changed in the 45 years since H Rap threw down that bloody truth – because Viet Cong prisoners were not throwing themselves out of helicopters, and Fred Hampton did not just die in his sleep, and Emmett Till, &c. – what makes now different from then is not the violence. It's the fact that we have arrived at a point where too many people are willing to stroke their serious chins and say that, sadly, yes, we are a nation that must torture, that our police occasionally just *have to* kill someone where they stand, executed without trial, because reasons. And it all boils down to one sad and simple fact.

America, the greatest nation in the history of forever, the beacon, the shining city on the hill, the land of dreams for millions of immigrants – this land has become the redoubt of a mass of pants-pissing cowards, desperate for Strong Daddy to

keep us safe from the boogey man, a fearsome beast of many disguises who will kill you in your sleep because he hates "our way of life".

One of Those People.

Rick Perlstein's *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*, provides a useful compass point for surveying the landscape of America's nascent acceptance of violence on its own behalf.<fn>I'm not talking about the political elites, whose affection for violence runs at least as far back as the charmingly misnamed Boston Tea Party. That crowd never hesitates with the iron fist.</fn> There is a bright, straight line that runs from Vietnam to Watergate to the Reagan administration, on through Central America and the Middle East, and on through Ferguson and Staten Island, the execution chambers of America's prisons, and right to the doorstep of detention centers in Afghanistan and Thailand and at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. And if we had time, we could trace that line back through Bay of Pigs and Mossadegh and Lumumba and WWII camps for Japanese-Americans, the violence of Jim Crow, our military adventurism in Latin America, the genocide of Native Americans, to slavery. And we would also have to talk about drone strikes, and the unfortunate collateral damage, &c. But this is hard enough to swallow as it is. Baby steps.

During the 60s and 70s, the social displacements stirred by the emerging Rights movements unsettled comfortable assumptions of Real America.<fn>Real America of course meant White America, plus some of those others we grudgingly tolerated, to a point. I was raised in Real America. *Mad Men* is an accurate portrayal of my formative years.</fn> Women were asserting themselves, Blacks were asserting themselves, Latinos and peaceniks and gays, and so on. Those People were telling people like my parents that they were mistaken, that Real America was a fiction and a crime. A crime that was no longer tolerable, that would be overturned "by any means

necessary". And Real America became very afraid.

And there were leaders who recognized this fear and set out to harness that energy to fuel their own ambitions.

That meant stoking the fear. The post-WWII rise of the national security apparatus was predicated on a scary campfire story: that godless commies were determined to destroy "our way of life". Our involvement in Vietnam, among other places, was justified by this reckoning, even though there were obvious financial motivations for our purely noble defense of freedom wherever natural resources or strategic control were desired. Thus, any opposition to military adventurism must de facto be the work of people who hate our freedom, and therefore deserve whatever means we devise to deal with them. Those People.

Stoke the fear. Minorities insisting on equal treatment in the workplace meant that your Real American job was on the block, easy pickings for the militant black or the liberated bra burner, who also by the way were prepared to tempt your daughter into a life of drugs and wanton promiscuity.

Hippies and peaceniks, obviously dupes of the commies, were ready to turn your cherished homeland into a haven of unwashed, drug addled, free love bums who had nothing better to do than make fun of your beliefs, disrupt the way things have always been, and recruit your children to become one of Those People.

The mollycoddling of dangerous criminals was too much to bear. Technicalities and Constitutional protections and such. Courts letting the guilty run free. Courts telling states that the death penalty is forbidden.<fn>Don't worry. They reversed that decision. Guys like Rick Perry are free to execute without interference.</fn> Miranda rights. Everything stacked to favor Those People, those thugs, those super-predators. Please, Strong Daddy, protect us.

Here's the great insight of Perlstein's Reagan chronicle. In the mid-70s, after so much unpleasant reality was laid bare, this Nation faced a choice: understand the conflicts and contradictions and historical truth, and work to make this nation a true reflection of the stirring ideals of the Constitution; or deny the truth staring you in the face, and retreat into fantasy.<fn>America loves it some fairy tales. From the first Thanksgiving to a chopped down cherry tree to a rail splitter to a coonskin cap to Remember the Maine!, America can't get enough of flattering fantasy. The 60s and 70s cut those tales down to size. Sorry Virginia, no Santa Claus.</fn> Become adults, or stay in Neverland.

You know how it went.

Along comes Reagan with fantasy in irresistible packaging, bedecked with bunting, and America, desperate to be told pleasing bedtime stories again, enthusiastically infantilized itself to bring on Morning in America. We became a nation hungry for happy lies and happy endings. Do whatever you have to, Strong Daddy, and keep us safe from harm, and thanks for the 230 channels and the big screen.

And so we smuggled weapons to Iranian militants in return for money to fund Central American terrorists who smuggled drugs to America to help fund their revolution against the evil commies, who sometimes just happened to look like nuns and priests. And so we made alliances, in turn, with noble freedom fighters like Gadafi and Saddam and Noriega and the Iranian mullahs, and with heroes like Savimbi and Rios Montt, &c. And so we armed and trained Afghan freedom fighters who later became the Taliban. And when our friends became inconvenient, or tugged too hard on the leash, we found new friends to replace the ex-friends that were now our enemies.<fn>We have always been at war with Eastasia.</fn>

But don't ask questions, better that you not know all this, just trust us.

The justification for secrecy has not changed since the beginnings of the Security State. Revealing secrets will embolden our enemies, endanger innocent people, undermine your very safety. The arguments were the same, from Mossadegh to Vietnam to Pinochet to Cambodia to Watergate to Nicaragua to Granada to yellowcake uranium. Those People are coming to kill you in your sleep. We'll keep you safe. Shut up, sit down, and watch the teevee.

And then an airplane flies into a New York skyscraper. Those People are here! We must do everything possible to protect ourselves. Please follow the bright line to the window where you will surrender your freedom for the illusion of safety. Don't ask questions. In fact, why don't you just take a nice trip to Disneyland and leave it all up to us.<fn>Really. Bush the Dimmer actually suggested this in a speech just 2 weeks after the al Qaida attacks.</fn>

And so we follow the bright line directly to this week's torture report. As always, the idea that any of this activity was truly a secret is a sad joke.<fn>Any more than the secret bombing of Cambodia was a secret or the secret death squads in Latin America and elsewhere were secret. The truth about Abu Ghraib came out years ago, and the few bad apples excuse only flies if you really, really want it to. Clap harder.</fn> Once again, we are being told that we have no right to know certain things that our betters have done on our behalf because national security. Besides, it's all a pack of lies anyway, created by Those People Who Hate Our Way of Life, and we would love to prove our innocence but really can't because national security. In fact, continue our betters, not only are we completely innocent of these scurrilous charges that we simply cannot defend ourselves against because national security, but we only did it in the first place to keep you from being murdered in your sleep by commies/Black Panthers/hippies/Muslims/terrorists/&c. So shut up, sit down, and watch the teevee.

And the bright line takes us from a society that condones whatever-it-takes-as-long-as-we-can-deny to whatever-it-takes-whatever-you-say-boss. To a moment in time where America will actually entertain a Serious Conversation about what makes torture acceptable. I'm sure this is also some kind of teachable moment.

Torture. Let that word hang there.

Too many Very Important People with oh-so tender feelings think that word is extreme and uncivilized and inflammatory, think that it shuts down any possibility of a polite conversation about how and when Torture might in fact be okay, just this one time, or maybe two, or 47, or 122, or whatever.<fn>"The CIA maintained such poor records of its detainees in [Country] during this period that the CIA remains unable to determine the number and identity of the individuals it detained. The full details of the CIA interrogations there remain largely unknown..."</fn> And that's exactly the point. There should not be any rational discussion. Fuck being polite. We should react with horror, with outrage. The people who do this in our name, and those who make excuses for them, should be reviled, excluded, quarantined from our midst.<fn>Most of the architects of this horror are actually living pretty high on the hog.</fn> Any reasonable discussion about when torture is justified is morally equivalent to debating when slavery might be okay or when you might get a pass for sexually abusing a child or for committing a rape because you were sure that 'no means yes and yes means anal'.

But no, people will say, with a sad head shake. Sometimes you just have to do whatever it takes, and besides, Those People hate our way of life. Sometimes, you just have to accept that rectal rehydration and waterboarding are not just okay, but necessary.

And therefore of course, you just have to accept that a 12-year old playing with a toy gun is going to be murdered by a

jittery, unfit cop<fn>He had been fired from a previous job.</fn> because the brave policeman was afraid; or that some guy standing on the street is going to be choked to death; or that a child in a hoodie deserved to die because a Rambo-wannabe didn't like seeing one of Those People in his neighborhood. Because one of Those People scared the piss out of our protectors and they had to act because they knew they could convince that that was one scary motherfucker and you would have killed him, too.

The similarities between Nixon's apologists and those of the Torture Regime, or the defenders of summary police execution, lie in this. Secrecy is justified by the overriding concern for Security. Any mistakes made on your behalf are justified because you are afraid, because you want Strong Daddy to slay the dragons. Your right to know is trumped because the brave defenders of your freedom say you can't handle it, or that you knowing would jeopardize your brave defenders, or because the commies/terrorists/urban predators will kill you in your bed so shut up already because Those People aren't you.

The difference? Only that, when exposed, our latter day Strong Daddy says, yes we did these things, and what of it. You made me what I am, says Strong Daddy. What did you expect? Isn't this just what you wanted?

A nation willing to be kept in a state of infantilized fear – fear of Those People, whoever they are –cannot deny the violence done in our name. We are instead compelled to excuse it, to blame the object of our violence for their own fate. They had it coming, those Muslims, those Black Panthers. Those kids. Those People.

Twenty-eight years ago this month, Elie Wiesel said this upon receiving his Nobel Peace Prize:

"We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the

tormented."

I grew up with a naïve faith in the concepts of the Constitution and the ability of the Nation to self-correct. That whole We the People in order to form a more perfect union myth. And amazingly, despite all that has happened and the cynicism and despair that is so hard to resist, I still hold that faith. Even though I came of age during the political calamities of Vietnam/Watergate,<fn>And it was truly calamitous. The fear that Nixon might call upon a military solution to protect his presidency was palpable.</fn> I came away from that episode with a stronger faith in what our system of government can achieve. It was not an easy pull, but in the end, the Watergate investigations, the Church and Pike committees – the refusal to accept the claim that we could not handle the real truth – led to the kind of transparency and moral expiation we need so badly right now. It was Constitutional self-governance at its best, in response to degraded government at its worst. And then, when we made a choice to embrace a fantasy, my generation failed us all.

Red pill or blue? Maybe this time we'll choose to grow up. Watch this. There's still hope.

Turn off the teevee. Stand up. Make some noise.