

LITERARY LIFE AND DEATH:

ON SUICIDE AND SALVATION IN A LIFE OF WORDS

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I'm not famous. Michael Dorris was. I've published a novel, some stories, a few essays. Writer Michael Dorris had what I've aspired to, what I've always believed is a reason to exist—good books published by reputable houses, excellent reviews, grant money, a prestigious university post, a national book award, and the distinction of having made a difference in the world by his contribution to child welfare and to Native American literature. He even had an additional bonus most writers don't even expect: a literary spouse, an artistic equal, a collaborator who must have been, at least at one time, an incomparable soul mate. Yet all of this came to a painfully ignominious end under a false name in a cheap motel in New England. With a plastic bag over the celebrated author's face.

Writers and suicide have had a fatal attraction throughout modern literary history. What female writer has not pondered the deaths of Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath? Who does not know the sad tale of John Kennedy O'Toole, as new readers for his *Confederacy of Dunces* appear every year? What grad student has not compared Hemingway's theories of heroism with the rifle that ended Papa's life? Dorris' choice was hardly original, so what, we might ask, is all the furor about in his tragic demise? Why were so many contemporary writers—myself included—stunned by it?

Perhaps on the eve of a new century, at a time when almost every author with a hard drive has “done” therapy, suicide—the terror of the soul—is almost tawdry now, particularly in a case of such obvious accomplishment. Suicide reeks

of a Byronic agony, a Keatsian sensitivity that in a minimalist age seems excessively emotional, too sentimentally tortured. Artistic madness exists in this cyberspace era? A classic novel offers its reader an ending that makes sense of human life. Dorris' death does not make a good ending; it's a startling jolt to the senses, an affront to the idea of art as redemption. If I write my books with integrity and achieve literary success, his suicide tells me, this will not necessarily earn me peace of mind.

I don't want to believe that.

Of course we know now that Michael Dorris' life was considerably more complex, darker, than anyone outside his circle knew. Of course no one believes that art can always rescue those facing grave personal devastation. But we do think it gives us fortitude, survival abilities uncommon to the world at large. I have often told my writing students—make your creative life your underpinning, let it weave the messy strands of your psyche and your personal life into a tapestry of wholeness. I don't know what to tell them about a talented and successful writer for whom this was not possible. Am I back to agreeing that all artists are a bit unbalanced? This was the conclusion of British researcher Chris Milhill whose study, in the *Manchester Guardian Service*, rates deceased male writers according to their level of sanity. In Milhill's research, poets fared better than novelists or playwrights and—interestingly—writers who died by their own hand did not always receive the worst rating.

I have reason—both as writer and as human being—to identify with the idea of suicide. I am among those who have looked squarely into the eyes of someone trying to end his life. When I was six years old, I walked into my parents' bedroom in time to see my father slashing his wrist with a blood-soaked razor blade. One thing I vividly remember about that image was how brutal a razor blade can be to the human body. My father's need to punish his flesh in so vicious a fashion reminded me, years later, of fanatical religious extremists who flagellate themselves. This was eerily echoed in Dorris' method. To put oneself "to sleep" with pills or carbon monoxide is infinitely gentler than sharp objects or a plastic bag which suffocates. To those who believe artists are drawn to suicide for its romantic appeal, for its drama, try picturing the face of someone you love peering lifelessly, contortedly, through cheap plastic. This is extraordinary self-hatred, the bathos a good writer will strive for a lifetime to avoid on paper. Some writers clearly are mad.

On the day I learned of Dorris' death, I was moving into an artist colony in New Mexico, for a three-month residency to work on the fourth draft of a new novel. I was depressed about writing: I had recently had a disagreement with a new literary agent over a hundred pages I'd worked on all year, and despite being a finalist I had just lost a major literary grant. I walked into my adobe house in

Taos, the grant rejection in hand, thinking—*I'm tired of this, tired of all this struggle for time and money and respect.*

Then I met Jess Dettner.

Jess Dettner is not famous either. I first saw her from a distance, a thin straight-backed elderly woman with wiry white hair driving a neon-orange ancient VW bug, the passenger door held together with duct tape. When she alighted, in cargo slacks and a multi-pocket canvas vest bulging with fishing flies, we exchanged introductions. Her house adjoined mine and later I could see through her glass-paned front door: at a small wooden desk she was bent over a portable Smith-Corona typewriter, the kind I'd used as an undergraduate twenty years earlier. When I checked my door at midnight before I went to bed, she was still at her desk, still writing.

The next morning we ran into each other again; her eyes were so deeply blue and alert I needed another cup of coffee to stare into them. In our second conversation she mentioned hearing I'd published a novel, said that must be remarkable. We also talked about D.H. Lawrence, whose memorial gravesite is a few miles outside Taos. Then Jess said she'd better be off, that she was tired because a story she was writing had kept her awake half the night. She smiled. "I've written twelve novels myself. Never sold one. A few of my stories." And she waved and headed toward her house.

The click-clack of her typewriter—a sound in the computer age I'd almost forgotten—lasted long into the night.

After a few days we'd stop when we saw each other coming and going. She explained how grateful she was to be at the colony, in that her government-subsidized apartment for the elderly in Los Alamos reminded her of a "container." One day I asked if she'd lived in New Mexico when Georgia O'Keeffe was around. Jess nodded. "I even saw her once," she said, eyes flashing. "I spotted her in a museum in Santa Fe. I went up to her all brazen—she was already famous and didn't like people much—and I said I liked her work. And do you know, we had ourselves a chat, a photographer even took our picture together, and I sent it to O'Keeffe and she signed it."

Jess's steady blue eyes looked off. "I had the picture appraised when I sold all my artwork. But they said it wasn't worth much, wasn't art, just journalism."

She didn't explain why she would be selling her artwork and personal effects, perhaps no one ever has to explain such things. We'd already traded complaints about how much groceries cost in Northern New Mexico. When she walked away—after telling me she sends her stories principally to *The New Yorker* because she once got a rejection from there which said "Try us again"—I think about the photo of her and O'Keeffe, yearn to see it in order to glimpse who Jess the Writer was thirty years ago. I wonder what it would be like to write for

fifty years without ever holding my own book in my hands. At least, like Dorris, I've known that joy. What would it feel like to have to sell the galley copy of my out-of-print first novel because I needed money? Then it occurs to me—having to sell the talismans of your memory to buy a loaf of bread, ending your life without your dreams realized—these seem like very good reasons for suicide.

Why does a successful writer, even an unhappy writer accused of terrible abuse, end his life at fifty-two, while another writer, alone and with no fame or fortune, choose to live to be eighty-nine? What does Jess Dettner have that Michael Dorris, and all the literary suicides before him, did not?

A reason to stay. Fortitude. A belief that upcoming work matters, a belief apparently unsupplied by all of Dorris' honors. If nothing else does, writing can make you value yourself.

I've not met many Jess Dettners; I'm more familiar with the Michael Dorris story. I remember how it felt to publish a first novel that sold well and garnered excellent reviews, giving me a sense—after a decade of struggle—that my life was going to work. No one told me what could happen next. That success would mean I'd leave my fifteen-year marriage, that my Doubleday editor would move to a publishing house with no interest in fiction, that despite having sold out all editions of my first novel my publisher would release me, that I would have a car wreck so severe I was almost killed, that I would fall in love with someone who treated me terribly. Then the final blow—my literary agent of twelve years (and my friend for twenty) suddenly dropped dead, also at fifty-two, of a heart attack. Did I mention that I had no permanent teaching gig to fall back on? Did I mention I was finally confronting my childhood issues, which were the reason I'd begun writing in the first place?

Some days—for a while—I didn't get out of bed. I had begun writing in order to make something useful, hopefully even beautiful, from the literal and emotional chaos of my life; I had written well, I had a successful book to prove it. Now the chaos was worse? This isn't how it's *supposed* to be, I accused my Minneapolis apartment walls.

One day the walls answered back—Yes, but this is often the way it *is*.

During the subsequent two years I wanted to stop writing. I was afraid to, for fear there would be only one alternative, to follow in my father's footsteps, to live out my genetic predisposition. My life, where the professional and personal entwine like bone and tendon, felt out of control, as though its directions had been misplaced. Desperately, I began writing harder than ever. I felt completely crazy as I wrote frantically to keep from going crazy.

This made writing more important to me than it had ever been. For the first time since I'd begun writing seriously fifteen years before, I began going *to* the computer when feeling hopeless rather than fleeing it. Writing became my lover and my best friend. What had been driving me toward the edge became the ledge holding me above the abyss—this is the paradox of the artistic life. What can destroy can also save. Whether she thinks of it or not, this is what Jess Dettner knows. Talent won't give you joy in writing, nor will outward success. You give it to yourself—this antidote to despair—word by word, slowly, year by year. People outside the creative arts often say: But you are more than what you *do*. Yes, and no. Art work is different from most other professions. I always believe in myself first as a writer: this way I know that terror and heartache are fodder. This way, I always believe most in the books I have yet to write. This way I always believe in my reason to be.

On one of our last days in New Mexico, Jess and I drive up to the Lawrence Ranch, where Lawrence and Frieda lived during their brief but inspiring stay in the Southwest. It's a rite of passage for writers visiting Taos to scale the five-mile rutted dirt road up Lobo Mountain in unsuitable city vehicles. The last half-mile is on foot, and Jess has to stop to cough several times as we climb the steep trail to the small white adobe shrine at the top. She tells me that one of her unpublished novels made use of Lawrence's theories about love and I wonder again who Jess the Younger was, and mention that my undergraduate thesis was about the Nottingham novelist. At the summit we enter the cool stillness of the whitewashed crypt guarded by an alabaster phoenix. The tombstone with "D.H.L." carved on the base, light illuminating it from a rosette window directly above, sits silently implacable (debate continues to this day about whether his ashes are really inside it or not) and is covered with mementoes left by the faithful: a postage stamp from Australia, a coin from Mexico, a magpie feather, a circle of four stones, a handwritten note from two cats in Massachusetts named Ursula and Gudrun. To give Jess a moment alone, I sit out on the steps staring across the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Lawrence was already dead by the age I am now; he had already written the major novels he'd leave behind. Tuberculosis cost him the potentially greater work of his fifties, sixties, seventies.

That would have been a reason, as he was slowly robbed of his strength, to go so mad you ended your life. To know that your life's work could not be finished.

After Jess and I walk back down the mountain, we run into the Lawrence Ranch caretaker; learning we are writers, he lets us inside the house Frieda and Lawrence occupied, which is closed to the public. We stare at the massive stone fireplace where they cooked their meals, the tiny manual typewriter upon which Dorothy Brett prepared the manuscripts for the author who could not type. It is a meager 1890s adobe cabin, where Lawrence composed portions of *The Plumed*

Serpent shortly before his death. No bathroom, no amenities. Not the life, by any means, that Michael Dorris lived, nor as comfortable as mine.

As Jess and I bounce home through the sagebrush mesa in my decade-old sports car, I consider our four writing lives—hers, mine, Dorris, Lawrence. The best word for an artist’s mental state may be *barmy*, derived of *balmy*, which can alternately mean deranged or as health-giving as the balm of Gilead. Lawrence didn’t kill himself, but he did steal his professor’s wife and he did throw things, and he and Frieda fought to the point of striking each other; I ran off with a classical musician I met when invited to speak at a small conservative college, and I once resigned from an academic job by leaving a note on the door that said I was tired and needed a martini. I tell Jess I believe I write my life’s course, that if I give a character an experience I’ve imagined, often I have that experience later on. That writing records my past, and sometimes predicts my future. She smiles, says to believe you’re writing your history before its time is madness. I laugh but as we nose down the mountain, I picture my father’s frozen eyes, I picture Michael Dorris in an unknown motel, and I glance over at stalwart Jess in her fishing vest, and suddenly I know that to decide to stick around to write a chaotic life into coherence—this is the act of the chronically sane. Jess and I are separate feathers on the regenerating phoenix Lawrence always believed in.

As Barry Lopez has written, “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them.”

Sometimes.

Author’s Note:

This essay originally appeared in the literary journal *Spectacle* (Vol. 1, No.2), which unfortunately ceased publication several years later.

The essay was written before so much research was done connecting creativity and mental illness, and also before the disturbing rise in teen suicide. I have chosen to leave it as it was published.

Jess and I corresponded for several years after living next door to each other at the Wurlitzer Foundation; when she died, she gave the photo of herself and O’Keeffe to the Wurlitzer Foundation. I wish I knew what happened to all her writings.

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