

## **Current Trends in Creative Non-Fiction as a Form of Self-Discovery and Self-Awareness While Rediscovering One's Ulna Humerus**

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"I Was an Undercover Geek at a Mensa Convention"

...so there I was, standing at the baggage claim uncomfortably trying to fit in -- make that blend in. I'd assembled my disguise very carefully: L.L. Bean one-size-too-large madras, seersucker blazer with plastic pen guard, unironed chambray work shirt, Korkease sandals I still had from the 70s worn with brown cotton bobby sox, and baggy Levis. Yes, I had prepared to spend the next four days at a Mensa Convention in Reno, Nevada over the 4th of July weekend.

Mensa? Mensa. It's an organization with a very restrictive membership based on a very, very stringent IQ test. This test culls the applicants to reflect a membership that represents the top 2% of the population. They profess to enjoy one another's company through participating in a wide range of "intellectually stimulating social and cultural activities." It's this last part that always got to me. These social and cultural activities conjured up the epitome of stereotypical geekdom to me — stuff involving Schrödinger's cat, synesthesia, basic neural circuitry with its relevance to developing empathy, and, of course, a dash of Foucault. Mensa was my "you can't join club" I'd always wanted to be a member of but was pretty sure I'd never qualify. And now, here I was with a group of genuine, card-carrying Mensans while we waited for our luggage in anticipation of a long weekend based on "intellectually stimulating social and cultural activities."

Let the activities begin.

And they did.

Right there at the baggage claim, before I'd even gotten to my hotel.

"Not much luggage comin' round," blandly commented a nice couple next to me, although I hadn't said anything.

So, I eagerly countered, "Guess that's because most of the people on the flight are here to gamble non-stop for the next 72 hrs. That probably doesn't require a big change of clothes, huh?"

I received a puzzled look.

What was I thinking? They weren't even talking to me.

"Oh, but I'm sure there are all sorts of other activities going on as well." Wink, wink, nudge, nudge -- hoping with this statement they would let me know they were actual "Mensans."

They just continued to stare at me as the bags on the carousel came slouching around on the conveyor.

Finally, there was my canvas bag. I could hear it approaching. No, seriously. As it approached, I could actually hear it...humming. Well, not precisely humming -- more like a muffled buzzing. And, as I heaved it off the conveyor, it got even louder.

I plopped "us" down on the floor where, next to me, I could just see the feet and the legs of that same nice couple...as they were backing away. My gaze traveled up to their faces, and I saw the whites of their eyes. It was then that I realized everyone in the baggage claim area had stopped what they were doing and were just looking at me in the same manner. I looked back at my happily buzzing bag and immediately tried to unzip it.

Of course, the zipper got stuck halfway which exposed even louder buzzing. As I struggled, I started to sweat in exasperation -- it was then the real me emerged *sotto voce*, "Well fuckin' A! Cut me some slack, Jack!"

With that, the zipper whizzed open revealing this jumbo Ziploc bag filled with my toiletries resting on top of everything. The entire plastic bag was visibly vibrating.

I looked up at the crowd, who by now were huddled together to see what was going to happen next.

They gasped as I triumphantly held aloft the humming/vibrating Ziploc bag and started waving it around as if it were a kind trophy.

"Jeepers! I guess I forgot to turn it off!"

Nothing. Just me and them staring at me -- frozen. And, dead quiet except for the vibrating bag which seemed to have gotten louder.

"My electric toothbrush!" With that, I unzipped the bag and pulled out the angrily buzzing toothbrush.

"Ya see?"

Yeah, they did.

They also looked vastly disappointed. That was when I realized what I must actually look like. The weird outfit, the sweaty Mamie Eisenhower looking bangs plastered to my forehead from my effort, and the accompanying beads of sweat running down the sides of my face from the suffocating Reno heat. And, lastly, the goofy, needy, pathetic grin as I enthusiastically waved my loudly vibrating electric toothbrush around for all to see with my glasses vaguely steamed from all this activity. Oh man. Not a great beginning. But jeez. What had they been expecting?

I found out later that night what they had been expecting -- a different kind of battery operated vibrating device. I would never have thought of that if a friend hadn't interpreted the whole scenario for me as I explained it over the phone.

"Melissa, just how stupid are you."

"I dunno, you tell me. You're the one talking to me..."

And, she did.

I was mortified as I thought back to the airport. I had continued with my bag and blithely stumbled onto the hotel shuttle with everyone while I smiled and laughed about the toothbrush -- only now realizing that no one was responding.

They were just letting me yammer on. Finally, I turned myself off like I had turned off the toothbrush.

As I looked around the shuttle, I inwardly cringed. Between my outfit and the vibrating toothbrush incident -- I wasn't close to fitting in.

Later that same afternoon, even though I'd changed into my regular clothes and gotten rid of the ponytail, some of those waiting to sign up for various presentations recognized me and smiled knowingly. That was nice. What I didn't realize was that I had just gotten in the line for the sign-up for "Porno Charades" which was offered twice a day along with a Zumba class. Quickly moving to another line, again without paying attention, this was for a workshop for first thing the next morning entitled: "Senior Sex - What You Didn't Learn in School." The dignified gray-haired gentleman standing next to me made eye contact and -- yes -- winked. If I'd had any moxie, I would have winked back, "Think I should bring my toothbrush?" But I didn't. A nerdy guy with a libido can be a scary thing.

Luckily, I didn't realize this was just the beginning. Soon it seemed as if all these workshops were right up there with that dating site from the New York Review of Books, "The Right Stuff Dating." But, I had no idea by now what "the right stuff" would be, and the last thing I wanted was a date. That toothbrush incident followed me wherever I went. All I wanted was to be able to pass as a Mensan without having to take the IQ test or a test for STDs.

My wannabe Mensan fantasy was becoming just that — someone else's fantasy. Maybe I should rethink this before the next workshop - "Probing Alien Crevices on Mars and Other Worlds."

Was this really what I wanted? A gaggle of sex-crazed geezer geeks fantasizing about mass and velocity while imagining it at seconds per seconds squared? And, I just knew their result would be in hertz - megahertz - in metrics, of course.

This just wasn't working. And, I hadn't come with an alphabet of plans...I didn't even have a Plan B.

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I didn't become this needy, nerdy wannabe until much later in life. I'd had the potential early on in school, but I sort of lost it -- by choice. I didn't want to be one of *them*, a geek, even though I was in all of *those* classes.

Eventually, I couldn't take anymore. I was already different enough, and I wanted to be like everyone else, and that was never going to happen. It was the 50s, and I had divorced parents. Not just divorced, but acrimoniously divorced. My father had run off with his secretary -- all of about three miles -- and started another family. And, my mother dressed me funny. Homemade dresses with bloomer underpants to match including the same lace as the dress and coordinated hand-knit sweaters. I hated my waist length blonde braids with matching taffeta ribbons as the ends. I wanted short fluffy hair. Oy, and the piano lessons. And lastly, I wanted not to have a sense of humor that made me laugh at all the wrong stuff, even when I knew it was obviously funny.

But, by reinventing myself on a daily basis, I was able to overcome this so that I was just eccentric rather than weird. I still laughed in the wrong places, but I was starting to have a good time -- even though I was only in grammar school.

By high school, I'd been phased out of advanced Math and Liberal Studies classes, and was allowed to take whatever I wanted. And then I found out that being cut loose also meant a loss of privilege which comes with those classes, and with that comes isolation. But I found other things to fill this gap, like playing the piano, singing, and dancing, and all with people who liked these activities as well, and laughed when I did. But I also found out that singing and dancing and fooling around will not get you into a fancy college. And, it didn't.

Eventually, the intellectual curiosity dormant for so long returned. And here it was decades later -- the opportunity to be with some real, live grown-up intellectuals! After all these years could I possibly pass muster with genuine Mensa members? Would I be able to keep up? Was there a possibility that I could pass the Mensa test? Naw, that was a stretch. I knew I was still a terrible test taker.

It was only through a series of unrelated events on Facebook that I'd even gotten invited. An old college chum, who I hadn't been in contact with for decades, invited me. I never even knew she was a member. (Real members aren't that impressed by their membership.) Skeptical, I realized I could be an "undercover geek" and write about it. I'd recently expanded my writing with a piece in the Los Angeles Times about being dumped by an ex-con boyfriend. But that's not geeky -- that's just stupid. But this? I was to be privy to the underpinnings of Mensa. All the plastic pen guard jokes I could make would be mine.

This is where the previously described outfit comes in. The first thing I thought about was my disguise. Yes, I'm that shallow. I didn't start Googling anything that would make me seem super smart, or even flipping through Encyclopedia Britannica with a knobby rubber thumb for speed skimming. Nope. I wanted to look the part, and only then could I get into AI (Artificial Intelligence) mode. That's how I came up with the outfit. I was very comfortable wearing it – just not all at the same time. Even the honest to Gawd genuinely skimpy ponytail with Mamie Eisenhower bangs. I had thought I was ready. But, I really wasn't at all. Not at all.

These next four days were to be a series of presentations, theme meals, exercise classes, game classes, field trips, crafts classes, writing classes, nothing that was so very different from going to any kind of a large convention except that it seemed as if there were a large number of presentations with sexual overtones. Even with Lewis Carroll and "Alice in Wonderland," the fella next to me leaned over and referred to him as "The Persistent Perv." I needed to find my friend from college, but I had this desperate feeling that I never would. Except, I knew she was presenting. But now, I was afraid to find out what.

So, there I was cringing in my room -- alone. Just me and my electric toothbrush. Maybe there was something I could go to this evening...besides Nude Kundalini Yoga. Hm-m-m-m...there was "Game Theory -- experiments that illustrate the motivation for game theory -- after each round – we'll look at what

the 'best strategy' (or lack thereof) is for them -- also, analyze the theoretical equilibrium and maximum potential gains."

I was starting to think about having room service.

Or, there was a presentation of "Notable Extended Movie Shots," followed by "Twenty-Five Minute Stories." But did that mean "25-minute Stories" or "20 Five Minute Stories?" Was I still really the only real Bozo on this bus?

I ordered a Club Sandwich with fries well done. That helped. Always amazes me how grease and salt and ketchup can improve one's outlook. I decide "I'm goin' out and I'm goin' in"...to something...whatever...do something...what's the worst thing that can happen?

Immediately stepping off the elevator, there was the sign for me: Closed Door presentation: "Facebook and Mensans." How I got here in the first place – reconnecting with my old friend on Facebook. That's what I needed, a down-home dose of mundane Mensans. It said Closed Door – I opened it.

I walked into the middle of something. A collection of people dressed the same way I had been at the airport sitting in a large circle glaring at one another. In silent unison, they all turned to stare at me.

Suddenly, it became an old "Twilight Zone," and everything appeared in black and white with gray overtones. I didn't belong there. This was truly a "you can't join club," and I was an intruder. Something wasn't right. They welcomed me, but they didn't mean it. They only smiled from the nose down with eyes glazed over.

A sullen, miscast Sally Field look alike flatly asked, "And, you might be and from where?" I was scared. This wasn't any sort of a presentation, but more like some 12 Step Program where you're only as sick as your secrets.

We went around the circle for introductions at a pace propelled by inertia. Although this didn't seem to diffuse the situation a bit, one woman directly across from me kept making very pointed eye contact. Her gaze was unblinking and laser sharp. I just wanted out, and there was no way. Slowly, I figured out what was really going on. All these people knew one another because they all stay in

touch on Facebook and now, they were face-to-face for the first time and it didn't seem ideal. There was some weird hostility oscillating between people like radio waves except none of them were on the same wavelength.

That one woman kept intently staring at me. Did she know? Could she really tell I wasn't a Mensa member? Was she going to "out" me? Would they do something to humiliate me? Did she recognize me from the airport and the toothbrush? Was I really going to have the very first panic attack I'd had since a piano recital in the 5th grade?

None of the above. It was my old friend, Doni, from college who I hadn't seen for 35 years, and she recognized me.

"Doni!" She slowly nodded "yes." With that, we both leaped up and ran across the room and just hugged and hugged. A reality show aura accompanied our jumping and screaming and hugging. The air in the room cleared with our friendship. We told everyone about knowing one another and a calm settled over the room. Somehow our friendship embraced and included everyone. Now, lemme outta here!

Finally, I wasn't alone. The worst thing that could happen by sneaking into that workshop turned out to be the best thing that could happen. After meeting up, things were different. I just relaxed and stopped looking for geeky punch lines to everything I saw. I didn't have to maintain my self-appointed position as an outside observer. I was with someone who had known me for decades, and I could just be me. It was so much easier. Doni's presentation on "Impressionism and Psychotherapy" was mesmerizingly beautiful.

That night we met up for "Carmina Burana" in Latin or Middle German -- you had a choice. Yes, we all had choices. When I realized that, it changed my perspective, on the whole, for the rest of my time there. I had made a decision to be there with a desire to connect, and that's what I was doing.

The Mensa members were just like everyone else. Some laughed at what I laughed at, and some took themselves very seriously. Some wanted to get laid,



and some just want to have a conversation with no subtext. Not much different than the people I see shopping at Ralph's or waiting at the car wash or...flip you off when you're driving on the freeway.

Next day, attending "Sexy Evolution: What the Pope Does Not Know About Sexuality?" Doni and I got the giggles. I asked the person sitting next to me if there was a time limit on the presentation and that got everyone involved in whispering back and forth bad nun jokes: "don't want nun, ain't got nun, don't wanna get nun, not gonna get nun."

Then there was "Aesthetic Medicine, Do You Really Need to Live with Wrinkles?" (...yes, just not mine); "What is Satori?" (any relation to Faulkner's Sartoris? – no, it's a Buddhist term for "awakening"); "Down & Dirty Physics" (What goes up must come down?); "Dumb Things Smart People Do" which segued into a "Rock-Paper-Scissors Tournament," and my joke about missing digits. With this, Doni and I were invited to the closing night activities to sit at a table with some of the people we had met!

As I went back to my room, I passed by the gift booths. Yes, I really did see leather pocket pen protectors, but I just kept walking and humming Kumbaya. I had been included. There was one last presentation I really wanted to go to and had made arrangements to meet up with Doni. Neither of us was disappointed: "Waging War on Pseudoscience -- Skepticism in Action." I passed Doni a note that read: "So, a scientist, a psychic and a "skeptic activist" walk into -- another dimension." She passed it to the person next to her, and we were invited to another party.

To complete the last evening, there was a Saturday Night Gala Banquet & Show entitled: The End of Time Burlesque Show (Strictly Adults Only!) The 4th Street Apocalypse Burlesque Troupe promise to titillate you since this troupe is well-versed in the arts of mental seduction and physical comedy." This time I didn't go.

Yes, I was an undercover geek at a Mensa convention and had a terrific time. There were no tin foil hats. There were no pocket pen guards — plastic or leather.

There were no Earth shoes from 1970. There were no Birkenstocks from 1990. There were no plaid, seersucker short-sleeved sports shirts. In fact, there was only one plaid seersucker blazer - mine. I spent the conference with a bunch of naturally smart, funny, friendly people who were presenting unusual papers, and who were great companions. I attended more unique programs than any one person could go to covering myriad subjects. I just avoided all the presentations that had the words "nude," "unclothing you're whatever," "discovering your real whatever," and anything that required a mat or a towel.

I had finally met The Geek, and the geek is...me.

Ah, the beauty of imperfection.