

Big Al Dissects Literary Fiction since No One Else in the Bar could pronounce Aristotle

by Larry Strattner

The other day I'm reading this magazine in the dentist's office trying to keep my mind off the drill sounds down the hall. The article is about some woman writer.

Normally I could give a damn about a writer even if it was Dennis Lehane. I happen to like most of his stories. But the only magazine on the table next to me was the one I picked up. I didn't feel like getting up and pawing through the Ladies Home Journals and Peoples over on the table next to a big fat woman who was probably in getting fitted for a bridle.

This woman writer talks about all the heavy thinking going into her stuff which I guess they call literary fiction. Literary is different from science fiction, fantasy or spy story fiction. I prefer books where slam bang, you're in, you're out. It moves. It's got what you need and it's done. You don't have to wonder why the main character is so screwed up and looking up his fifteen year old daughter's dress out of the side of his eye while he wrestles with his foot fetish. Life has enough real-time weird shit without reading about made-up weird shit.

After the doc puttied my tooth, I decided to drop down to the Cat bar and lay some of these eternal writer babe questions on my own personal Aristotle, Big Al.

Big Al hovers around three twenty. He's a smart sonofasnakewrangler. I've known him quite a while and he's dragged my narrow butt out of some bad spots on occasion since my businesses over the years haven't always involved the best people or the best products.

One thing I've always admired about Al is he has a low threshold for baloney. Even more importantly he can smell it on someone's breath when they talk. Al is a straight talker. He doesn't bother talking unless he knows what he wants to say and when he says it you can understand him.

It's three in the afternoon but dark inside the Cat bar. There are no windows. It's not in a part of town where you want to be looking out. Inside the Cat needs dim light to look nice. The name brand liquor sits on a couple shelves in front of a mirror on the wall. I'm always surprised every week goes by in which the mirror doesn't get broken. There's a sign over the mirror carved in wood just like a name and address sign you'd hang on your house, if you had a house. It says. "A Good Thing to Remember Friend, Is Not Everyone Wishes You Well" The sign sums up the social atmosphere and the clientele. It may even sum up Big Al in some respects. He carries a Ruger .40 in a waistband holster in the back of his slacks. Granted he wears his shirt un-tucked to cover it but most patrons know it's there. Not that Al would shoot you. But, if you're a big enough loudmouth there's always the possibility.

Three or four Olympic Marathon drinkers at the bar are doing their thing. I am more of a sprint drinker. I want to just get there, without a lot of agony.

Big Al is at the end of the bar with one of his butt hams on a bar stool. He's polishing a rock glass. It's kind of a little tic of his. It lulls his inner beast and he comes out of it whenever one of the

marathoners is ready to take another lap. Polishing the glass helps him not to kill any of the regulars who are usually pretty stupid, and fried to boot.

I can see him perk up a little when I come in but he'd never admit he's glad to see me. "Yo, Al." I say, pointing my finger at him.

"Ho." He rejoins. He always says "Ho." I don't know why. Probably the same reason the mechanic from the gas station down the street who's never been further west than Buffalo says "Howdy."

I put a five on the bar for my drink and say, "I was reading this magazine down at the dentist's..."

Al says, "You can read?" Like I said, he gets to the point.

"Yes I can read you sack of crap. And I want to talk about some of the stuff I read at the dentist's office."

"What, how to haul out a wisdom tooth without causing cardiac arrest so you get paid?"

"Jesus, Al, I'm sort of serious. I thought you might like to talk a little serious talk instead of looking at these guys all day who probably can't even fucking pronounce their names."

"Hey!" Says one of the regulars being as "Hey" is likely the only word he can pronounce; thus making my point.

"Relax" Al says to the regular. "He's only kidding. So what do you want to talk about? What could possibly have given a limp dick like you a hard on for serious conversation? To start with, what's your definition of serious?"

I fill him in on what the writer babe said.

“Ooo.” Says Al. “Literary fiction. Like Moby Dick. Or you, you dick. What about it?”

“Well” I say. “What do you think about the dilemma of a guy who's tortured by a history of incest and bondage?”

“Depends” Says Al. “On who was cested and who was bonded. If it was him then I'd say get over it. Nobody gives much of a damn about anybody and it's up to you to survive. You could maybe talk to some people. There are always people who will listen to you for money. But mostly you're on your own in this world. You gotta' fight your way out of everything in life. So get to it. If however he was the cestor and bondor then lock him up with Huge Henry Horny in the slammer and let him pay the price. He ain't gonna' get better so put him where he'll get it better. That's not too literary. What is this, some porno babe whose stuff you were reading?”

“No. But she writes about things heavy. People who are trapped, lost, in pain, like that.”

“Pain” Says Al. “Now there's a good one. When that nitwit old lady left-turned into me on my Harley I was a hurtin' puppy for a long time. Drugs help pain. Millions of addicts can't be wrong, right? I took some serious dope getting over that crash but I figured out something while I was doing it. Dope screwed up my clarity. I couldn't see anything or feel anything and I guess I realized I like to have senses. I like to be able to feel and see. Pain is a part of all of us. It's the frigging human condition. You know what I mean? Pain is like everything else, you gotta face it down. The more you medicate, you just stash your pain until one day you're sober and it rips out of you like that ugly lizard out of the guy's chest in “Alien”. If you don't live with your pain it'll get big enough to kill you. The ultimate pain treatment is suicide. You know what I mean?”

I guess I do. Liquor for me is pain medicine for embarrassment and insecurity. I also take it for sense of humor although frequently no one else appreciates my jokes. I take it to put up with other people.

“This babe writes a lot about death too. I mean I'm ok with James Bond kind of death and spy mystery death and crap like that but this is darker death, alone death, no reason death, just some guy showing up out of nowhere and crushing your windpipe. What's up with all that?”

“Everybody dies” Says Al unoriginally. “Death is only a problem for people who don't want to know everybody dies. Probably the “don't tell me” people are most of us. People who think about death most are most afraid no matter what they say. You gotta' get into the Now to shake it. Every day is your last. And you know the opposite of death is what? Life. Some people are more scared of it as they are of death. Life is scary. Living is scary. I think living is scarier than dying. Have you ever met my wife? She scares the hell out of me almost every day. It's hard to live. The inclination of an organism is to survive and multiply. I think I saw that on the Discovery channel. But surviving and multiplying is tough, and by the way, I saw you trying to put the make on Benny Pirette's babe the other night in here. If you had succeeded it would have been a good example of the organism failing to survive. Benny would mess you up royally. He would knock your butt into little protozoas all over the block. So watch your step. I don't want to be wiping you off the wall with a bar rag.”

“I can't help it” I say “I get a few in me and I want to boogie. It's not like I'm trying to actually get in anyone's pants or anything. I just want to have a good time.”

“Yeah, well, Benny doesn't differentiate between pants or no pants. He just sees your pointy nose sniffing around and he acts accordingly. You haven't asked about the Devil yet but he has to be

on your writer babe's list. Well, he's real. His name is Benny. He lives to do you evil. You know how the evangelist pukers are always saying "God is in everyone?" Well, he's not because the devil is in a lot of us and Benny's one. He's a pure love of hurting you kind of guy. He's the guy who helps you clearly identify who the good people are because they're so not like him. Is there evil in the world? You bet."

"Benny is the reason there are laws in most parts of the world. If there weren't we'd have to hang Benny for no reason anybody knew about and all the way to the rope he'd be saying, "I didn't know I couldn't do that!" Because he doesn't feel anything one way or the other."

Proof of evil is men have always found it necessary to write down what you can't do. That's why the rules are on the wall down by the dart board and pool table. The guys in here would kill each other over a stupid game without a second thought. The rules let me knock the crap out of them first which saves us from a bigger disaster."

"But you know" Big Al goes on. "Some guys are basically happy. They kind of stumble through life, don't hurt too many people, at least not on purpose, and kind of get to taste the honey. If there's some big cataclysm they are the first to go because they don't have that mean, fighter streak for down and dirty survival. Too bad, so sad. But while they're here and there's a little equilibrium I've got to say they make it better for the rest of us stiffs. Most dogs have their day, you know? Equality is only in math and when the math gets higher, not even there."

"Man, I just wanted to shoot the bull and you take off like a bottle rocket. I haven't even tried to talk about this stuff for a long time and you're giving me the philosopher run down. What's up with that?"

“You asked for it. Literary fiction is just that, fiction. Some people consider it more important to get all twisted up over dark and convoluted themes. It's all smoke and mirrors like business guys who think a light bulb is an earth shaking, life changing thing just because they're selling it to you for a profit. It's all crap. It's beautiful, or clever or seductive, but it's all crap. Stick to your Denis the Pain or whoever that fuck is you read and stay the hell away from literary fiction. I don't want to go through this again with you anytime soon, no matter how much fun it is. Literary fiction makes my head hurt. Get me?”

On my way home I pick up a copy of a new Dennis Lehane mystery. I'm looking forward to reading it. I won't need to discuss it with Big Al either. Dennis and I understand each other completely.

