

# 'Introduction' to LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT

by Smiley McGrouchpants, Jr-Esq-III

Herman Sligo was a bit actor who played Uncle Emil in three episodes of the popular television series *The Five Sisters*. After his death in a fiery car crash in late November 2005, that would have been the extent of his legacy to the arts community and the public at large, had the executor of his will not discovered — buried under mountains of paperwork, overdue bills, and out-dated and unsent 1040 IRS forms in a closet in the ramshackle apartment Sligo had rented on New York's Lower East Side — the controversial and astonishing manuscript you now hold in your hands.

*Letting it All Hang Out* caused an immediate sensation upon its first publication the following spring, given the extent to which the rambling, 600+ page pseudo-narrative seemed to openly flaunt its "fictional" status. What had Herman Sligo *seen* during his brief stint on the much-beloved sitcom that could possible have formed the basis for so many ribald, frightening and — as one reviewer[1] put it — "unremittingly depraved" scenes, such as those which occur in this "novel"?

Naysayers notwithstanding, one thing that is *not* a matter of dispute is that *Letting it All Hang Out* is first and foremost a literary work of the highest order. The breadth and depth of its characterizations, the well-nigh irresistible pull of its narrative drive, and the unremitting seriousness of its simultaneous ethical, political and aesthetic agendas quite clearly outweigh any claims literary trash-talkers may make of Sligo's goal to do little more in this case than air the "dirty laundry" of a much-maligned industry (i.e., television-show production) which most of us already "know" to be "evil." Such contentions arose on the basis of certain scenes which are so simultaneously vivid and earmarked by detail not easily available to outsiders that speculation ran rampant that Sligo must

have been at least an *observer* — if not necessarily a *participant* — in any number of the various debaucheries detailed herein.

Set around the filming of a thinly-veiled sitcom which is named (some would say, *sarcastically* named) *My Five Nuns*, the novel focuses on the travails of the cast and (certain) crew members as they struggle to come up with the 22 minutes of airable footage required each week by the network to keep the show afloat, whilst juggling ongoing (and *overlapping*) sexual affairs, various chemical dependency habits, unresolved (and often uncontrollable) family issues, the various and sundried pressures of lives spent perpetually in the public eye, and the ever-looming fear of cancellation. It is the last of these, in particular, which motivates — both as a method of celebration (after the yearly news of renewal comes back) and as a method of coping (when the stress levels get too high) — mass lovemaking sessions as intricate, complex and involved as anything found this side of the suppressed pages of the *Kama Sutra* or the Vatican's pornography collection.

Was Sligo a whistle-blower of entertainment excess or a corporate whore, hoping to recycle documentation of industry decadence for his own bigger slice of the pie? An unfeeling privacy-violator or an uncannily-feeling empath, privy to the deepest longings of those whose lives he came in contact with? An unrealized and misused genius whose deeper talent lay tragically untapped, or idiot savant who hit a "gold mine" and had precisely the requisite combination of empty head and vacant life leaving him open to fill himself utterly with every last, minute, telling detail of this sordid tale and serve it up completely straight, without distraction or diffused focus?

Sligo's grave is as silent as these pages ultimately would be if they were left unread. (The former cast and crew members of *The Five Sisters* certainly aren't talking, having been advised by network lawyers to keep a respectful and pointedly-vague distance from their thrice-employed former colleague's debut in print.) Ultimately — as with *all* texts, the hordes of jockeying-for-position pro & con "pundits" notwithstanding — the final verdict lies in the hands of

*you*, dear Reader.

I leave you with *Letting it All Hang Out*. As Anthony Burgess once said, on the subject of his own "controversial" novel, *A Clockwork Orange*: "Eat the sweetish segment, or spit it out. You are free."

Matthew Slaughter

Prof. Emeritus, Comparative Literature, M.I.T.

December, 2007

- 
1. David Denby, in an article in the April 17, 2006 *New Yorker* entitled: "*Letting it All Hang Out*: I'm No Prude, But Really! Come On, Now!"

