

The Fascination of Laura Clarke
by Bill Clunie

The environmental movement annoys Laura. She's throwing plastic sacks away left and right at work, every time a customer doesn't want one. "No bag," they'll say, "save a tree." Or, if they see the bag is plastic: "Save a dinosaur!" As soon as they leave, and sometimes even before, Laura grabs a bag and throws it away, scowling that scowl, that scowl that infuriates me so.

Laura lies to customers all the time, too. "Acting," she calls it, pronouncing the "A" as though it were an "E." "Ecting." I guess they're not big lies, but still. I see so much of it, day in, day out, that the cumulative effect is big. "Have you read this book?" they'll ask. "Is it any good?" "Oh, yes," she'll say. "It's excellent." She's never read it, I know that. She'll just say whatever she needs to say to sell the damn thing. Driving the sales, she calls it.

And she lies in other ways. If the trade edition of a book is selling well even after we've received the cheaper edition, she'll try to keep the less expensive one back in the stock room. "They're buying the big one," she'll say. "Let's keep those sales up!"

What else? My god, there's so much more. You would not believe. Somebody came in the other day looking for this new literary magazine published locally, Black Wool, or Black Sheep, or something like that, and she just glowered at the woman and practically wouldn't even answer her question. I had to pop up and tell the customer, "No, we don't carry it, I'm afraid you might want to try such-and-such place."

Practically before the woman is even out of earshot Laura is snarling about how why anybody would want to waste their time reading the locals is beyond her. When I protest that there are some fairly good writers here she just snaps at me. "If they're any good why haven't they moved somewhere else?" I was dumbfounded, let me tell you. I live in Oregon, in Portland, admittedly not the culture capital of the Western world, but still. We've had enough success stories that we shouldn't be too embarrassed, and if nothing else so many Californians have moved up here that our collective humility quotient ought to be fairly low by now.

She'll put Oregon down in other ways, fairly off-the-wall and somewhat telling ways, I might add. "I'm so embarrassed to live here sometimes," she'll say and I'll just roll my eyes thinking What now? "To live in a state with a woman governor, and a city with a woman mayor. It's just so embarrassing." I can't believe it and I stalk away, that's all I do, and when I'm rude to her a couple times later in the day she probably doesn't have a clue why.

Shall I go on? I could, you know. I haven't even described the tip of the iceberg here, not even the point of the tip. She lives on microwave food. She bakes herself in a tanning booth all winter long, and her skin is getting that desiccated look. You know that look. Lizardish. She'd like to tell the kids in the children's section to get up off the floor, to stop reading the books, this isn't the library, but our manager, thank god, won't let her, and there is more, so much more you would not believe concerning the inhumanity of Laura Clarke and I have asked myself many, many times in this past month, how, just how, pray tell, did I ever get involved with this woman?

I know how I got involved with Laura Clarke, but I won't tell. I'm silent on this subject, at least for now. It's my right, you know. I have the right to remain silent here. I really do, I hope.

So. In a nutshell. In the Hierarchy of the company we work for Laura is one notch above me, and she wants a couple more notches. Ultimately she wants a store of her own, and you would think there's plenty of opportunity for her to get one in this octopudlian corporation. We have over 1,100 stores nationwide. That's a lot of stores. That's a lot of books, you can't deny that.

But, before Laura can achieve her final goal, that blissful state of Store Managerdom, where she can run things as she wishes, where she can keep those kids in the children's section up off the damn floor, where she can eliminate the art section entirely (giving it a single shelf inside Crafts and Hobbies has been a goal of hers for some time now), before Laura can even catch a glimpse of that brass ring of authority she has to first move into the assistant manager spot opening up in the next couple of weeks.

Being an assistant manager is a logical stopping place along the route to running your own store. Our store has had three different assistant managers in the past year-and-a-half. All three were hired with the intent to manage, and all three were hired outside the company.

"Hiring outside the company to fill management positions has been the trend here at J. Johnson Booksellers for the past couple of years," he said, adopting the tone of the in-house newsletter "BookNotes." Our District Manager, Vern, had been with Binyon's Optical, and has no previous book-selling experience. He has done the hiring of the new store managers, all of whom have also had no previous book-selling experience.

Our latest assistant manager, the guy who is about to move up, is named Mark. Mark is fairly representative of the new blood the company wants to manage their stores. Mark doesn't know anything about books. I mean that, not a thing. Really. I'm serious. One of the first days he worked for us he was with a customer and I only half-heard what was going on but he asked the customer to spell one of the words in the title she was looking for because Mark couldn't understand her. Mark carefully wrote the word down in his almost charming little block letters and showed me the word on the pad and asked me if I had ever heard of it. H-I-A-W-A-T-H-A, was the word. Hiawatha. "The 'Song of Hiawatha?'" I asked the customer, an elderly woman. She nodded. "The Longfellow poem? I'll see if we have it."

Okay, so Mark's never heard of Hiawatha, he's probably not the only one, and it's not as though I think Longfellow is all that great anyway, but the thing is, this is not an isolated incident. Mark does not know anything about anything when it comes to books. The other day - and this was after he had been with us for a month, mind you - I overheard him with somebody and all I heard was "Louise L'Amour, isn't she the mystery writer?" My blood chilled, I'm telling you. It's not as though I think Louis L'Amour was a wonderful writer or anything, but if one is in the book-selling business one really ought to know who these people are. It's a matter of simple self-respect.

So Mark, who would not even be suitable for an entry-level, minimum wage position in a bookstore, as far as I'm concerned, Mark, who, aside from his ignorance and his rather slow wit isn't such a bad sort, Mark - I have to know: why was he hired? Why?

For one thing, he is a friend of Vern's, the District Manager who hired him. They do have a kind of Mutt and Jeff feel to them. Vern is tall and Mark is short. Both have a beefy quality that comes from their regular workouts together, and both are always sporting and laughing off little injuries - muscle strains or pinched nerves - which also come from their regular workouts together. Both seem frozen in the late seventies. The feathered hair, the moustaches, the tackily hip quality to their ruthless climb up the corporate rope. They were in the same fraternity in college, that much I have learned, but Mark dropped out of school while Vern continued on to get his MBA. They were TEKE's together, members of the largest college fraternity in the country, the Tau Kappa Epsilon frat. Mark, it seems, got something out of his short-lived college education, something apparently more beneficial than knowledge of the major works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

I am tempted to draw a conclusion here, that the problem with American business is the old boy network, based on favoritism over ability, with the college fraternity system nestled securely at its rotten core. But what I see is just an isolated incident, I know that. I'm hesitant about drawing large conclusions from singular situations, that is a practice I distrust. But still. It makes you think.

Upper management, management above the store level, has become increasingly disdainful of book knowledge lately. I must admit I was befuddled for some time by this - after all, books are our business. Why is book knowledge frowned upon of late?

The company line is that we have far too many bookish, nerdy types working here standing around pushing their glasses up their noses talking about, oh, Longfellow or some such thing when they should be out on the floor driving those sales. A recent memo from Vern illustrates the current thought.

To all booksellers. And before we go any further, lets (sic) take a look at that word bookseller. Have you noticed that if you break that word up the seller part is longer than (sic) the book part? Well from what I've seen we have a lot of people working for us who know a lot about books but not quite as much about selling. So lets (sic) get out on the floor greeting those customers, and keep driving those sales!

None of us are quite certain what driving those sales really means, except for maybe Laura. It is, apparently, an attitude, an attitude that, like abstract expressionist art, say, is ultimately about nothing but itself.

It's an attitude generally expressed in the presence of a higher-up, one who has the power to promote. What driving those sales really means, from what I've seen, is this: When you're around Vern, don't talk about books. Don't talk about titles and authors, no more than you must, at any rate, and for God's sake don't talk about the content of books. Talk about money. Talk about high-end items. Talk about low-end items. Talk about impulse buys. Talk about sports or cars, even, but whatever you do keep the talk away from books just as much as you can. Because I've figured it out: This is why book knowledge is belittled by upper level management. They don't possess that knowledge. And rather than consider their ignorance a liability, they have collectively decided to consider it an asset. It's the Big Lie, and it's really an effective lie because I think they might actually believe it themselves.

Laura seems to be fitting into the New Way at work better than I am. She can talk driving those sales as well as Vern, and now that Mark, Vern's little bodybuilding buddy, is moving on to manage his own store, the flagship store of the district, mind you, a 1.8 million dollar per year store, Laura's cornflower blue eyes are edgily set on the soon-to-be-vacated position of assistant manager. She often speaks of it to me, as much as we speak of anything when we're away from work. We rarely speak of anything, actually. We have sex, that's what we do. She comes over to my place and we do it rapidly and without any fuss and usually Laura leaves immediately afterward with a terse "See you at work" tossed back over her shoulder like a pinch of salt. And that's it, usually. But today, inexplicably and quite out of character, Laura has fallen soundly asleep on my bed. Her mouth is open. She's naked and uncovered and as I stare at her I think of how it is I ever got involved with Laura Clarke.

Bright winter sunlight is pouring through the window like water out of a downspout and it strikes Laura's leg in an aggressive rectangle of pure light. She has smooth legs. My eyes follow the line of her body, but I think perhaps I should not go on here. I shouldn't because then I would have to explain why it is I ever got involved with Laura Clarke, and that could get me into trouble here. It really could.

I shouldn't even be spending this much time on a nude Laura Clarke lying on my bed in a flattened cube of light. Awhile back I read a piece of film criticism by this French feminist critic who posits the idea of the camera as an aggressive male eye objectifying and degrading women, lingering on their intimate places and ways in an overtly puerile manner. Well. I don't know. It's true enough. I guess. I hate admitting it, but she's right, okay, fine. I've resigned myself to its truth, actually, and now I can't even watch a movie anymore without thinking about it, without being sadly aware, self-aware, almost, of this invasive male eye, and I don't want to be a part of it, part of this male tyranny of peepery, I really don't, and what am I doing here but making my own movie, my very own low-budget squiggly line of a movie? And isn't my camera stuck right there, focused right on that spot, objectifying madly away? It's hard to deny, no matter how much of a creep it makes me feel. But I really can't deny my reality, either. It just wouldn't be right to do that.

So I'm in the back room at work. I've flash cut myself here. I can't get the movie industry out of my head, can anyone? Movies have so overwhelmed every other media that.... I can't even finish that sentence, that's how overwhelmed I'm feeling here.

(This is the end of part one of "The Fascination of Laura Clarke" by Bill Clunie. The conclusion will be in the July issue of the Upper Left Edge.)

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I rankles me when somebody tries to force somebody to do something.
John Wayne

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Perhaps, after all, America never has been discovered. I myself would say that it had merely been detected.
Oscar Wilde



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