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MARY GAITSKILL ON “THE OTHER PLACE”

BY DEBORAH TREISMAN

In “The Other Place



(http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2011/02/14/110214fi_fiction_gaitskill),” the fiction entry in this week’s issue of the magazine, Mary Gaitskill offers the story of a man’s obsession with violence. We spoke by email about some of the themes in her writing.

In “The Other Place,” you take on a very difficult subject: the root of men’s violence toward women. It’s a subject that most people would rather not have to confront. What compelled you to write about it?

I don’t agree that it’s a subject most people would rather not confront—on the contrary, it seems to me a subject that people are extremely eager to confront in the form of fantasy and drama. Look at how many movies, TV shows, and popular novels present lurid stories of violence against women, often based on true crimes. I don’t know any better than anyone else why people are drawn to this. I would guess that it’s a combination of fear, excitement, and secret acknowledgment that this violence is a part of our nature, that it’s not just in men, though in men it is more likely to take a physical, outwardly expressed, potentially sexual form. Most people sublimate the violence, are even able to use it in a creative way. There’s an interesting and very terrible line between that sublimation and more overt expression, a line that gets dramatically crossed in wartime situations, for example, when men who in their normal lives wouldn’t rape commit rape.

Women’s relation to violence—men’s and their own—is very complicated. I would say that the mother in the story is emotionally violent, but she turns it on herself, not understanding the ricochet effect that it will have on her son.

What do you think caused the narrator of your story to have these obsessions? Is it (though he denies it) misplaced aggression toward his mother? Is it a hormonal or chemical imbalance? Is it genetic?

I don’t know. To the extent that I can understand something like that, it’s an intuitive understanding, not a rational one. I don’t even think that people who act out such obsessions understand them—perhaps they understand them least of all. In the case of this character I’ve created, it does have something to do with the feeling of being unacknowledged or ignored. But to explain a violent sexual urge that way would be ridiculous. It’s mysterious by nature. It’s not that there is no explanation but, whatever it is, it’s both too deep and too fast-moving to be tracked; it blends with too many other things, the way dreams blend different things together. People say that if you talk too much about sex you take away the mystery. I say, if you’re somebody who likes to talk, talk all you want—it’s not listening. You will never take away the mystery.

By taking impulses that we usually distance ourselves from (serial killers are psychopaths; normal people like us don’t behave this way, etc.) and attributing them to someone who seems reasonable and “normal”—a family man, a successful real-estate agent, a fly-fisherman—you force us to face the idea that people we know and trust may also be harboring these feelings. Do you think that’s the case?

I think you know the answer to that. Why else is a show like “Dexter” popular? Why have I written this story? Why has the magazine bought it? I can’t take the reader into the mind of a serial killer, because I don’t know that mind. But I can take the reader into the mind of somebody who harbors some of those feelings, and people are interested in it because they recognize those feelings. However, I do think that some of the feelings that are harbored are, thankfully, pretty superficial. It’s one thing to entertain an idea, even to feel it physically, quite another to act on it. Our culture encourages people to entertain these feelings; I realize that this is old-fashioned of me, but I sometimes consider that a sign of decadence, playing with something that shouldn’t be played with. At the same time, it is an attempt to sort something out, to grapple with the reality of these feelings. In this country, apparently normal family men joined lynch mobs, and normal communities went along with it; we all know what happened in Rwanda and Bosnia. Of course, we want to understand this, or to cope with it somehow, because it’s frightening.

Do you think that Douglas will go through what his father went through? Will he also try, for a time, to “make it real”?

I don't know. I imagine that, either way, it will help him greatly to have his father with him on that deep level, even if they never discuss it verbally.

You have Douglas watching graphic and disturbing videos online—which could, perhaps, be blamed for piquing his interest in violence of this kind. But there was no Internet when his father was young and experienced the same desires. Is it possible that we have things wrong—that, rather than encouraging violence, those kinds of videos give Douglas and others like him an outlet for their fantasies, whereas his father had no outlet and, therefore, had to act on them?

I don't know. I don't think that the Internet creates feelings that aren't there, nor does it provide an outlet. On the contrary, what I have thought about things like computer games—what has disturbed me about them—is that they appear to stimulate feelings of aggression without providing any physical release. The aggression is, in itself, normal, especially in young boys. If it gets roused in a game like football or even tag, it gets discharged and also tested—you get a realistic sense of what it's like to bang into another person, to hurt or be hurt. You are more likely to understand your responsibility in that situation because the result is immediate. Sitting in front of a computer, there is no release. Feelings get roused and then—what happens to them? I wonder.

This is something I'm sensitive to because, being a writer, I tend to live too much in the world of my head, and I know I need to check in with the physical world to keep from floating off into space. It's scary to me to watch the world around us get less and less physical while in the imaginary world of pop culture aggressive impulses and fear reactions are floridly, furiously stoked and indulged. I've had students quite seriously ask me how they can know what's real and, while it's a question that could've been asked in the past, I think people trusted their bodies and their emotions more then, in part because they weren't constantly being stimulated by illusions.

A lot of your fiction—like "The Other Place"—explores the hidden roots of our emotions and desires, some of which can take on frightening forms when expressed. I imagine that this is difficult territory to immerse oneself in, and yet you do so seemingly without flinching. That seems to me courageous. Do you feel that fiction writers have an obligation to explore questions like those raised in this story?

Actually, I flinch constantly. I am twitchy as hell. But no, I don't feel that fiction writers are obligated to explore particular questions. However, particular questions or themes can be broad even when they are very specific—sometimes especially when they are specific. "The Other Place" is about a person haunted by violent fantasies that he almost acts on; to me, it's a story about a delicate soul carrying around something that is much too big and kinetic for him, but that he's stuck with, that won't leave him alone, although he doesn't know how to deal with it. Perhaps few people carry that particular impulse with them, but it seems as though people carry so much that they don't know how to make fit in with their lives or who they think they are or should be. It's not always negative things,

either; it could be a love or an ideal. I think my unfortunate character here is in love with the girl he spies on. What he's doing seems creepy, but his desire to be in her presence, whether she sees him or not, is a hopeless sort of love, which has gotten attached to something else altogether and taken on a perverted aspect that he can't control. I don't think that is so uncommon even if most people don't go where he does.

About courage, thank you. But I don't feel that it's especially brave to sit in a room and write, unless you are Orhan Pamuk and someone is threatening to kill you for doing so. Something like riding a horse—which I've recently started doing—requires courage, especially for me, as I started out being actually scared of horses. Writing does require endurance, both in terms of focus and willingness to sit with a lot of self-doubt and intense feelings of inadequacy and frustration, not to mention loneliness. That part is a nightmare, and it can take months to break through it. But it's not just me—I think anyone doing serious work has to deal with that, regardless of subject matter. It comes with the territory.

I'd like to talk about other people's art in relation to your question. Part of what I loved about the HBO series "The Wire" was the way the characters embodied qualities of power and vulnerability, feeling and total non-feeling, between people and within each person, and showed how feeling can clash with the practical demands of where you are in life. These polarities are perhaps the most dramatic thing at the root of human life, the most anguishing, poignant, and occasionally beautiful. Sometimes, frightening. Especially the question of feeling and non-feeling. No matter how big or small the life is, by whatever social standard, how these dualities play out, run up against each other, run together, or reverse themselves is always a story. "The Wire" had a scene that just killed me, where a middle-aged security guard foolishly stands up to a young psychopath named Marlo, not knowing what he's dealing with, trying to reach Marlo, who has no heart, on a heart level, to assert his self-respect and his sense of the world as a decent place. Marlo ends the conversation saying, "You want it to be one way. But it's the other way." Marlo's muscle arrives and he walks off, and we realize that the guard is going to be murdered for this small, noble act, leaving behind a wife and child. It's a futile, terrible loss—in a way, plain stupid. We feel the helpless quality of that kind of big heart, but we also feel the strength of the gesture.

I'm also thinking of a Japanese writer, Natsuo Kirino—in particular, a novel of hers called "Out." It's "darker" than anything I've ever written, and the characters are tough, tough people, the housewives as much as the gangsters. Kirino clearly prizes strength and despises weakness, and I imagine that she would be impatient with my confused panty-waist characters. I feel that one of the great themes she is dealing with, maybe not consciously, is that of form vs. feeling or form over feeling. In the end, her toughest protagonists are deep in that feeling/unfeeling dichotomy and it literally tears them up. It's extraordinary. What I work with is usually more subtle and quotidian. I have an interest in weaker people, perhaps, or in people who are more "mixed" in nature, I guess

because those are stories much less frequently told, or, at least, not told well. There is so much hope, struggle, and suffering that we don't see, because it's almost impossible to convey—you have to be so inside the person to understand. Do you remember the scene in "The Metamorphosis," when Gregor the bug is trying to turn his doorknob with his mandibles and his family is on the other side of the door yelling at him, "What's wrong? Just open the door!" They have no idea how hard it is because they don't know what he is, and there's the sense that they've never known—that is a perfect picture of what I mean.

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