

MEAT FOR TEA

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THE VALLEY REVIEW

FAUX



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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Guest Salutation with Gerald Yelle

Thanks, Elizabeth, for asking me to write the guest salutation for the Faux issue of *Meat for Tea*. It's a problem we never get away from, isn't it, trying to figure out what's true and what's false? A lot of people claim to value integrity: You're who you are at all times to all people and never play it false. If you think that's how you are, how do you know you're not fooling yourself? It seems you have to take it on faith. Easy to do if other people agree with you. But even so ...

If it's all just a matter of faith, if you never really know for sure what's true and what's false, you're pretty much free to believe whatever you want. You can radicalize yourself, because, who knows? Maybe there really are lizard-like child molesters running fake news and deep-state scams? Because who knows what the real truth is?

Well but that's the serious side of the question. The issue at hand is faux. We use the French word when speaking of less serious subjects. We say our coat is faux fur or we've made a faux pas. No existential crisis, just an embarrassment. Even animals get tricky at times.

I'm a fan of *Nature* on PBS. There was an episode once featuring tricksters in the animal kingdom. One is a funny-looking African antelope called the topi. The topi male makes a certain noise when it senses that lions are too close to the herd. This causes the females to huddle toward any nearby male, and if they happen to be in heat they could mate with a non-alpha male. Having figured this out, non-alpha males sometimes make that grunting noise even when there are no lions in the neighborhood.

If animals do it, does that make it okay? Of course. No reason to be judgmental. Maybe faux is everywhere, but that doesn't mean it's everything. What's not faux is feeling disgusted by people who destroy the lives of others. There's just way too much of that shit. Usually they do it because of some belief or other. So hey, believe what you want, just don't act on it if it means shooting up a pizza parlor. I know people who read *Meat for Tea* don't need to be told, and for the rest of the world it may be too much to ask. But what else can I say?

With that I salute you, *Meat for Tea*, you compassionate purveyor of free-speech fun and games. And thank you Elizabeth and Mark for making it happen and keeping it going.

Love to all,
Gerald

me and jane

Kate Kinney

A few months before we broke up, my ex-boyfriend Jack read *Jane Eyre* as part of a “100 Books to Read Before You Die” project. I hate these types of lists.

Don’t get me wrong—it’s not “best of” lists themselves that I hate; it’s the assumption that these lists function as objective assessments of greatness. The curation process itself is almost always idiosyncratic and personal—the first step towards forming a subjective argument. For example, the titles you select for a list like this might reflect prejudices and predilections related to your reading habits, ethics, aesthetic values, identities, or cultural preferences—none of which have anything to do with literary quality (if you can even adequately define that). And on a broader level, “best of” book lists raise questions about the business of publishing and marketing: Who gets published? Who doesn’t? Whose books get reviewed, and how often, and by whom? Which books make it onto high school or college curricula and why—or why not?

The name of Jack’s project—100 Books to Read Before You Die—implied that reading a specific set and number of books would provide a fulfilling life—that there were certain books one had to read in order to be a worthy person. This was a common (patrician) American and British assumption in the 18th and 19th centuries. But Jack wasn’t reading Virgil, Plato, or Aristotle. He didn’t have a private tutor drilling him on Latin grammar so he could translate Ovid. He wasn’t landed gentry becoming grounded in the same classics that his father and grandfather had also studied because it was the aristocratic way. He wasn’t preparing to launch a new country founded on classical democracy and Enlightenment philosophy.

No, Jack used a hodgepodge of internet sources to compile his list, rarely asking me for advice or input, even though I have an MA and PhD in literature. What kind of argument was he trying to build? What biases did his list reveal? Why did he trust random sources on the internet more than me? Gradually, nagging doubts crept in—did he not respect my opinions? Did he feel that he needed to compete with me? Or was I unconsciously making him feel inferior and his list was an attempt to redeem his self-esteem?

Jack and I met in 2017, at a mutual friend’s birthday party in the Catskills. At the time, I was in the middle of a bitter custody battle with my ex-husband. At the party, Jack and I sat around the bonfire all night, talking only to each other, bonding over the stress and joy of being single parents and how rewarding we found our work as educators, him for music, me for literature.

The fact that he lived in the Catskills and I lived in Queens wasn’t a problem, not at first. Rather than feel lonely in my too-empty apartment on the two weekends a month my kids were with their dad, I drove to Jack. His son, just five years old at the time, took to me right away, without the skepticism my own children, who were eight, 10, and 12, had lately been presenting. Jack’s son didn’t have a court-appointed attorney-for-the-child peppering him with questions or a forensic psychologist asking him to draw pictures of Mom’s house versus Dad’s house. He got to just be a kid, and Jack and I got to just be us.

The first few years, when I'd visit Jack, he'd plan elaborate meals—he's a talented chef and even cooked professionally for a while. If he was out at a gig with his band when I arrived, he'd leave notes, once using fridge letter magnets to spell out, *I love you, Kate*.

The months before we broke up, though, around the same time that he started on his list, more often than not he'd be sitting in his threadbare Lazy-boy, not getting up to kiss me hello when I arrived. He'd have eaten something unappetizing—his son's leftover dinosaur chicken nuggets or frozen ravioli with jarred marinara—or else he'd be waiting for me to order take-out, which had limited options in his small town. We couldn't even agree on pizza anymore. He liked the puffy Sicilian style at the restaurant on one end of Main Street, while I preferred the crispy thin crust at the other place.

As Jack slogged through the books on his list, I tried to be sensitive to the feelings of either competitiveness or inferiority that I feared were motivating him. I tried my best not to be pedantic. I tried to let him come to his own evaluations and opinions. I tried not to take offense if he dismissed my interpretations. I tried. I really did.

Jane Eyre is different though. I first met Jane in 1983, when I was in third grade, in the library of the small town in New Hampshire my family and I had recently moved to—a town I knew we would inevitably leave. It was our fifth move in eight years. I was attracted by the cover, which depicted a line of sad little girls in black dresses. While I didn't understand most of it, I identified with Jane's loneliness.

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When I reread it as an angry, idealistic teenager, I admired Jane's rebellion against the hypocritical authority figures Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst. In my 20s, I furiously wrote my master's thesis, *Love as Illness in Jane Eyre*, in the middle of a painful split with my live-in boyfriend. In my 30s, I read the novel again as a new mother trying to negotiate family responsibilities with my desire for freedom. In my 40s, after my divorce, I found solace in Jane's steadfastness when it felt like my own life path had been swept away.

To say I have an intense connection to *Jane Eyre* is an understatement. And Jack knew this. For my 47th birthday, he gave me book-shaped earrings that were miniatures of a Penguin Classics edition, the one with Charlotte Brontë's portrait on the cover.

So when he got to the section where the unhinged Bertha Mason appears, I couldn't help myself. Over breakfast one morning, I told him about how Jane and Bertha were twinned characters, an aspect of the novel I find endlessly fascinating.

"If you go through the Thornfield sections," I explained, watching Jack sponge up egg yolks with a piece of toast, "Bertha shows up whenever Jane feels oppressed by her gender and role in life."

"Huh," Jack folded the soggy toast in half and shoved it in his mouth. "I guess you can read something like that into it if you really try."

He'd belittled my opinions before, but this one stung. I'd fallen for Jack because of what he was—kind-hearted, friendly—as much as for what he wasn't—controlling, jealous. He even had a “Smash the Patriarchy” bumper sticker on his car. But by assuming I was wrong or misguided in my field of expertise, he had applied a strategy straight from the patriarchy playbook.

In another era, I might have let it go—chalked it up to ignorance or pettiness or bad manners. And if I were younger, at a different stage of life, I might have insisted on a discussion about the origins of his dismissiveness so we could resolve it and move forward. But I am so tired of being the one to point these things out: to the men I've been involved with, to my male colleagues when they talk over me, or my male students when they challenge me. It's exhausting.

Jane Eyre, especially its widely reviled ending, is ultimately about the limitations of women in Victorian England. While Jack and I were dating, the Supreme Court limited women's rights by overturning *Roe v. Wade* and, in a backlash to years of progress for women, sexist language was becoming an increasingly acceptable part of daily discourse. It couldn't be part of my love life too.

The following weekend, Jack's band was playing in Brooklyn on Saturday, so he came into Queens on Friday. Possessed by passive aggression, I decided to treat him the same way he'd been treating me. I didn't buy his favorite snacks before he arrived. I didn't stock the fridge with the seltzer he liked. I didn't park my car on the street so he could use one of my building's parking spots. I made myself a salad for dinner but didn't assemble one for him. He could order takeout from any of the thousands of restaurants with every imaginable cuisine that could be delivered to my apartment with one swipe on Seamless.

When he arrived, I stayed on the couch. I scrolled on my phone while he told me about his week. I challenged him when he complained about his boss. After about an hour, I yawned and told him I was tired.

“It's over, isn't it,” he said.

“Well, I think that's a larger conversation.”

“What's there to talk about?”

And that was it. I didn't argue with him. We decided to stay friends, which I fully meant in the moment. I wasn't expecting the rage that arrived a few days later.

Every day for 11 months, I was angry. I nourished my anger by creating my own lists, counterpoints to his stupid list, lists that laid bare all the foundational cracks in our relationship, lists that only detailed his flaws and what he hadn't done for me. I ticked off all the times I drove to see him (144) against how often he came to Queens to see me (36). I listed how I'd helped his son get over his fear of water and taught him to ride his bike without training wheels while Jack tended to withdraw into his phone when my kids were around. I recalled the times when he claimed to want my opinion only to dismiss it (final tally: 25).¹

¹ All numbers are approximate and highly subjective, but I did really try to count.

I also found myself obsessively checking his Facebook page. For the world and our mutual friends to read, he reveled in his happiness, proselytizing the awesomeness of his life. However, he did take some time to somberly reflect on the situation in the Middle East. “When will Israel and Palestine learn that violence is not the answer?” he wrote, ending the post with a sad face emoji.

Every few weeks, he’d send a text asking how I was. Sometimes I wrote a venomous reply. Other times I was cruel with my concision. He told me at one point that I really knew how to stick a knife in.

Ten months after the breakup, he asked to meet for dinner. I agreed to breakfast. He cried and said he missed me. I remained stony. A few weeks later, I saw on Instagram that his band was playing with some other friends in Brooklyn. Out of spite and determination, I went.

I drank three slushy machine margaritas one after the other because it was so unnerving to see him socially and be around our mutual friends yet not be together. I’m not advocating drinking for one’s problems, but the tequila knocked something loose. When the bands finished playing, we sang karaoke with a group of our friends, dancing and laughing.

The next day, I woke up with a headache, but without the rage that had been my constant companion for almost a year. I spent several days feeling bereft without it. Eventually, though, I felt the relief of its absence. Although my anger had been protecting me from feeling the disappointment of yet another failed romance, it had also been consuming me. I’d been devoting almost as much energy towards being angry at Jack as I had to maintaining our relationship when we were together.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha’s rage is both destructive and generative. Yes, it destroys Thornfield in a conflagration, but it also spurs Jane to action. Without it, Jane would have been trapped as Rochester’s mistress, her fortune unrealized, her path to selfhood incomplete.

A few months ago, Jack called one night and told me that he’d made a mistake. He apologized for undervaluing me and our relationship.

“It’s really important to me that you forgive me,” he said.

I thought for a moment. “I forgive you,” I replied. “But we’re done. I just don’t have those feelings anymore—they’re gone.”

Seen from a different perspective, my unexpected, unwanted singledom is a gift. My children, now 16, 18, and 20, are busy with friends, jobs, school, sports, and other interests. For the first time in two decades, much of my time now is fully my own. I can call a friend in the morning and meet for lunch or dinner that same day. I can take a quick train ride to a museum or a gallery or a concert or a reading or a lecture. I can apply to week-long writing workshops in bucolic locations. Or I can just stay home, watch whatever I want on Netflix, and always get the exact kind of pizza I like.

Adrienne Rich reads Jane's union with Rochester at the end of the novel as "a continuation of this woman's creation of herself."² However, if we review the facts of the narrative, it is not a happy conclusion. Jane, the character, is forever trapped in a treacherous, stultifying ending. She is the mother of a young child on a secluded estate, married to a dangerous man.

I do agree with Rich that Brontë struggled to give Jane the best ending she could within the parameters of the time. And Rich's interpretation suggests another possibility. Jane tells the reader that being with (the now partially blind and physically diminished) Rochester is "to be at once as free as in solitude."³ Throughout the novel, over and over again, Jane chooses to be alone: to protect herself, leave a situation she has outgrown, uphold her integrity, or follow her own path. Indeed, the novel begins with young Jane by herself, content with a book, safe for just a few moments. Maybe the perfect marriage that Brontë envisioned for her character wasn't a marriage at all but rather a symbolic, wishful singlehood. Rochester is hardly a presence in the final pages; he is merely Jane's prop.

After the breakup with Jack, my best friend confessed that she'd seen our split coming for a while. "I just figured you'd wait it out until you could leave on your own terms," she said, over post-yoga lunch at a Thai restaurant near her apartment. "And you did."

It took me a while to understand what she meant. How was being single the year I turned 50, after a 30-year string of failed romances, my own terms? Eventually, though, just like I questioned the underlying argument of Jack's list, I reflected on what my post-breakup lists revealed. I realized that not only had I long been keeping a secret tally of the ways in which he'd disappointed me, I'd also spent the last couple years of our relationship slowly backing out, waiting for him to realize I was gone. Maybe his dismissal of my (well-researched and critically supported!) opinion on my favorite book was, in part, his way of lashing out against my emotional distance and silent dissatisfaction.

Initially, our relationship felt like an escape from one of the most painful and strenuous times of my life. But after my custody case ended in a settlement that nobody liked yet all could tolerate, when my home was no longer a place I wanted to run away from and my city no longer just a map of painful memories, the landscape shifted, as did the ways I chose to spend my spare time. For one, I needed to take on extra work as a freelance editor and proofreader to claw my way out of debt—I'd been paying my lawyer with credit cards and loans. But I also wanted to put more effort into aspects of my life that had languished during the years I'd spent my free weekends driving from Queens to the Catskills. I wanted to work on my creative writing, reestablish friendships; I wanted to create new texts, new memories. I also found myself craving time to just sit in my favorite chair, sip a cup of tea, and look out the window. The initial setup Jack and I tacitly agreed upon had changed, and neither of us were willing to revise it.

Charlotte Brontë was 12 years younger than I am now when she died, likely from complications with a pregnancy. And Jane's story ends when she is still a young woman with a small child:

² Rich, Adrienne, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress," in *Jane Eyre*, Norton Critical Edition, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 483.

³ Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, Norton Critical Edition, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 384.

Whether she survives her marriage to this kinder, gentler Rochester—not to mention any subsequent pregnancies and births—is up to the reader’s imagination.

In this next phase of my life, *Jane Eyre* has imparted another lesson. Solitude—I no longer call it loneliness—can yield joy, satisfaction, and, most importantly, independence. Neither Charlotte Brontë nor Jane were fully able to make this choice, but I can.



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