Living the Novel

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

It seemed to be the golden age of Romantic Fiction. People say that it started with “Doctor Zhivago” written in 1957, and then a slew of others followed. Who could forget the works of Rosamond Neal, Georgette Heyer and Janet Lambert? It was the beginning of the sexual revolution, but maybe not for these writers. It might be boiling over in San Francisco, but elsewhere it was quietly simmering in suburbs all over the nation. It was the birth of the “Bodice Ripper” genre of romance fiction. Romance so close to sex that it was even orgasmic. Readers could not get enough.

Calvin Fanning had been writing copy for Gubbins and Henshaw for a while, taking the job in the city’s biggest advertising firm straight out of high school. Advertising the new thing in the fifties and sixties and Cal wanted to be a part of it. He had a flair for words, and he had ideas too. It was going to be his future. But the year after he started, the same year “Doctor Zhivago” was written, Vince Packard published “The Hidden Persuaders”, an attack on the morality of the advertising industry.

In their city that meant trouble, and only a year after Cal had married Linda he was without a job. Gubbins and Henshaw were cutting back and Cal was fairly new. LIFO they call it – Last In, First Out.

He had no college degree – he had staked his future on advertising. He needed to get work and ended up working in a booth at the parking garage. It was a boring job, and it seemed like the only thing to read, and the only thing to read that he had easy access to were some books that he wife had bought – cheap novels – romantic novels.

Cal was only 3 pages in before he realized that he knew the ending and that he could write this stuff better than the author, and she was selling thousands of books. He started scribbling down ideas and within a week he had a portable typewriter in his booth. He could still handle the till and the tickets, and he could type too.

Linda urged him to write. She said – “Use the talent God gave you. Who knows, you may make enough to earn a living. Some do.”

His first book was called “The Memory of Him” and he adopted the penname, Constance Dunn. He sent it to the local publisher and got a letter back immediately. They were ready to publish within a month and there only questions were how soon would it take to write the sequel? and the one after that? Not only did it hit the bookshops in his town, but across the country.

Then came the obvious question – who is Constance Dunn? Can we meet her? Can we see her on TV? What does she look like?

The obvious answer is that Constance Dunn is only a name. In fact the writer of “The Memory of Him”, a steamy romance of man-worship, is a weedy unemployed advertising copy writer from the mid-west … and a man! That could never be the right answer, and Cal knew it.

He asked Linda whether she would stand in for him. There was to be a book signing in his home town and it was to be televised. Could she be Constance Dunn? It seemed easier to deceive than to deal with the embarrassing question that would arise if a man had written that book. It was the book that had left thousands of women wondering why they had settled for the man in their lives when they could have had Him – the man remembered by Constance Dunn’s lucky heroine.

Linda was one of those women. She had read the book with curiosity at first, and then an admiration for her husband’s skill, and then mounting fascination, and then sexual frustration, and then …, well, it was time for a woman to decide. A future of boredom or a future of passion?

She simply left a note on the kitchen table. “I have found somebody else, and I am leaving you”. She took on a few items of clothing – the sexy dresses. She left the rest. She suggested that he burn them. “I am not that dull woman anymore. You are simply the wrong man for me, now.”

The book signing was already arranged. The publisher had even booked an appointment with a “stylist” name Arthur Hochenstetter to prepare Linda (as Constance Dunn) in a manner “more than just physical appearance”. Who could stand in for him now? Cal had the gift of imagination, but in times like this, imagination of the worst that can happen can be terrifying.

But at the same time, Cal realized that his sadness at the departure of Linda was more disappointment than grief, whatever that means. He would get rid of her clothes, and one of the first items that he pulled out of her drawers was the shaping garment she sometimes wore under a tight dress. It lay on the bed like a person, suggesting to him that thing that he needed was just this but with somebody inside it, somebody her size, which also happened to be his size.

Just like the cartoon, he had a lightbulb moment. Could he? Would he be able to pull it off? It could resolve all of the issues that had worried him about using Linda or anybody else. What if she is asked questions about the writing? Questions that only the real author could answer?

He looked at himself in the mirror. Nondescript was the word that came to mind. A blank physical form that seemed ready to take on shape and color.

He put the garment on. It was a perfect fit except where it pinched where it should pinch. Then he put a dress on over it. Then he took the dress off and shaved his legs. By that act it seemed as if he had decided, as he put the dress back on. But the notion seemed ridiculous, and then he remembered the card that the publisher had sent, and he went to the desk where he was now just proofing his second book, and he found it.

The ART of being a Woman

Arthur Hochenstetter

Stylist

The question was now – how good was he? Cal packed what he had seen wearing in a bag and put his own clothes on, and he went to visit Arthur Hochenstetter.

“You see, the problem is, I am Constance Dunn.” It seemed best to get straight to the point.

The stylist’s soft pink hands flew up to hold his face. He was large and squared jawed but clearly a homosexual – Cal was not naïve. The little squeal confirmed it. It was not one of horror, but delight.

“Oh I do love a challenge,” the stylist said. “Now let me look at you. Yes, that’s good. Now, what have you brought with you? Yes, you can put that thing on, until we find something better. This dress is awful, but if I can make you look good in this, then you will look fabulous in something decent. What? No shoes? We will have to find you something. Let me check the size. Yes, I think I might have heels that will fit you somewhere, just for practice. Yes, practice, Darling – walking and talking and how to use your hands – that is what marks a lady. We can start now if you like, because the hair and makeup slot I have booked for you will not be enough.”

This man was like a whirlwind. Cal hardly had time to speak, and when he did, there was a hand held up to stop him.

“No, Darling, No. I think we should start there. That voice will not do. And please don’t call me Art, that is only for business for obvious reasons. My family and close friends call me Tur. It’s a German thing. But I think we are going to be close, so please call me Tur.”

They met again the following day, and that day Cal went home in a dress, and stayed in women’s clothing the rest of the day, and he wore a nightie and face cream to bed. It was all part of what Tur called “immersion”, and it seemed to be working. The object was for him to appear feminine by default, and that is to be achieved by living that life. Cal found that he quite enjoyed it.

But when he went to see Tur the day following, he could not bring himself to wear a dress.

“I don’t look like a woman,” Cal said. “Perhaps I need a wig?”

“Don’t be silly, Darling,” said Tur. “This is 1959. The pixie cut is the in thing. If it’s good enough for Audrey Hepburn it’s good enough for Constance Dunn. You have plenty of hair. We just need to wash out that Brylcreem then add some volume and some color.”

Cal was doubtful. Without hair like a woman, how would he look like a woman.

“The classic pixie just needs more feminine makeup and a nice pair of earrings,” said Tur. “You will need to learn to style your hair and put on your own face. I never want to see you dressed like this again. You are simply too gorgeous to dress down like this.”

Two days later Constance Dunn walked into the book shop in a stylish tight black skirt and heels, and a colorful, flouncy blouse. She greeted the manager with a smile and a soft handshake, and delicately took her seat behind a table stacked high with copies of “The Memory of Him”. Constance had practiced a signature with a large looping C and D followed scrawls, and a line crossing a T. It was a feminine hand that was transferred to the words in the first flyleaf – “With best wishes to Betty, Constance Dunn.”

It seemed that she would face 100 Bettys that day, or more. All women, except for the few men buying the book at the behest of wives. They all gushed about her work, and she just smiled, adding the occasional word in the high voice she had practiced with Tur. The signing was a huge success. It made the evening news – “The author of “A Memory of Him” stunning blonde Constance Dunn”.

Towards the end of the signing she was approached by a man who introduced himself as Brian Manderley.

“I am your national publisher,” he said. “We are very pleased with your work – not just this book but the advance copy of your next book. We want to pay you an advance for that, and the third book, but perhaps we could discuss it over dinner?”

Nobody had ever looked at Calvin Fanning like that before, least of all Linda, but the realization was emerging that this was not Calvin Fanning anymore. It may not have been Constance Dunn (or at least not yet) but this person was closer to her than him.

“Dinner would be nice,” she said.

It was better than that. Brian Manderley was a gentleman and knew how to treat a lady. In his company, how could she be anything less? He had arranged for another book signing in another city, on the Thursday – only 2 days off. How could she not agree?

He drove her home, and opened the door for her, taking her right up to the doorstep. She wondered whether he wanted to kiss her. A story line flashed through her mind. He would take her and kiss her passionately. She felt momentarily aroused, and then realized what that meant for her – the pain of being constrained, and the fear of discovery. She decided that she would kiss his cheek and rush inside.

His last words were – “I hope that we will be working closely together, Connie. Even after tomorrow, I would love to see more of you.”

She leaned on the closed door behind her and listened for the sound of his car driving away. She was Connie. She had just been on her first date with a man, and she had loved it. The smell of him, and the feel of his 5 o’clock shadow as she kissed him, lingered. It was just like in the book. She now understood that she had experienced romance.

But the consequence was an erection that had to be dealt with. She went to the bathroom. Suddenly she felt ashamed of her body. It was wrong, whereas everything that night had been so right. She did what she had to do, but that night she dreamed of herself without those male genitals – full breasted, soft and smooth, and with a second pair of lips.

She called Tur in the morning, straight after three hours of furious typing. The experience of the night before had left her head full of silly girly thoughts that she just had to put onto paper. It seemed like the element that had been missing from “The Memory of Him”. It was pure emotion, and it warmed the soul.

“It sounds like a perfectly wonderful evening,” said Tur. “But if you date his again there may be expectations, so come around and see me this afternoon and we will decide how we are going to deal with this.

Connie put down the pone and looked at herself in the mirror. She was wearing a dress and a little makeup even though she had not planned to go out. She had just stepped out of bed and dressed for the day. Just as Tur had told her, she was “feminine by default”. This was her.

She added earrings and freshened her lipstick before going to see Tur.

“My Darling, you look exquisite,” said Tur. “And such poise! Constance, you are without doubt my finest work.”

“You should probably call me Connie. He does.”

“Are you attracted to this man,” said Tur. “There is nothing wrong with that, other than it will make me insanely jealous if you are!”

Connie was not sure if he was joking, but after that pause of uncertainty, she laughed. She said – “Not as much as he is attracted to me, is my guess. So are you going to tell me how I should steer him away without threatening my book deal?”

“Sweetheart, I am the wrong man to talk to about putting men off me. I spend most of my time trying to get them on me. But I can say that the obvious is to show him your ding-a-ling. That will do the job. But if that won’t work, there is something you could do that will require a demonstration. The problem is that men can be persistent, but if they get want then you can get on with a business relationship.”

Connie was confused, but Tur seemed to have got everything right before.

“I can’t have sex with him,” she said. “That is not physically possible.”

“You are wrong there,” said Tur. “It is up to you whether you should, but I can show you how to satisfy a man. And in your case, he never needs know that you are not a woman. It just requires a story and a concealment device, and the use of another orifice.”

Connie did realize that the demonstration would involve her orifice, but by the time the had retreated to Tur’s bathroom for preparation and then his bedroom, she was in a state of high excitement. Tur prided himself on being a skilled lover, and he knew a man’s body better than most men.

But afterwards Connie found herself crying. She had not expected it to go that far. She had not expected to be penetrated. She had not expected to enjoy it.

“Please don’t cry, my Darling,” said Tur. “I think that we both got carried away. I took advantage, perhaps. I am sorry for that. But you see, the real problem here is that I am falling in love with you. You are the most beautiful man that I have ever known, and I have known quite a few. And then you now pass so effortlessly as a woman, that we might even be able to have a life together. We can get arrested in this state, but with you we could go out for a meal, we could go dancing, I could introduce you as my girl. People would l think me normal, or at least not queer. Until things change, it is very hard to live as a homosexual man.”

Connie thanked him. She had felt wronged, but his explanation and apology were heart felt. He had prepared her, and he had been gentle and loving – there had been no pain – quite the opposite.

She left and slept alone, and dreamed of Tur proposing marriage and then in a flash standing beside her at the altar, she looked out at the crowd and then back, and Tur had become Brian. She woke up.

Brian had arranged to pick her up and drive them the two hours to the next city. She showered and washed her hair, drying it to build volume. She put on a dress and earrings, and did her makeup with skill. It was a different look – feminine and a little playful – less business-like.

Brian was standing beside his car looking at her approvingly.

“Remember me?” he said. It took her a moment to realize that he was referring to the book. She took her seat and they drove off, and into another successful day, following by a second dinner at the hotel where Brian had booked two rooms.

“Would you like to come to my room for a nightcap?” he asked.

“Would you give me 30 minutes to slip into somebody comfortable and then you could come to my room,” she said. “I think it’s bigger.”

“It is,” he confirmed. “You are the guest of honor. I am just another adoring admirer.”

There was a moment when Connie wanted to call his room and call it off, but somehow it was as if she owed Brian something. He was adoring her and had been all day. Was Tur right? Could giving him a little allow them to resolve an issue that she felt was getting in the way? The sensible thing might be to invite him in and in the privacy of her room to explain that she wanted this to be strictly business – there could be one drink and then he had to go. She was wearing a peignoir that hid everything, but could be pulled to one side between the legs – not that it would get to that.

That was the plan that persisted even as the doorbell rang, and even as she opened it. Then is collapsed completely and spectacularly. They were in each other’s arm with tongues in each other’s mouths. Passion had taken over, in the manner you only read about in romance novels.

But she was prepared, and he was hungry to be inside her. It did not take long, but every second of those minutes was like a day of total joy.

As they lay together, she said – “You understand that I am saving myself for marriage, which is why I insisted that … you know.”

“It was wonderful,” he said. “I should propose to you now. But we barely know each other. We need more trips like this. More signings, more readers, more books.”

“What if I can write another book past the one I just have?” she said.

“Then I will hire you as my personal assistant,” he said. “I am not about to let you get away.”

Connie called Tur when she got home. She wanted to go to see him again, to talk about what had happened.

“The question you need to answer, my Darling,” said Tur, “Is are you the kind of person who could be my lover at home and pretend to be my female partner if required, or do you want something else. I am queer darling, and I need a man, and you are the sweetest and prettiest man I know. Or you’re not – and that is you other choice. You could become a woman.”

“That can’t happen,” said Connie. She looked at the man that she thought she loved – this man who had made her what she was.

“My Darling, you only have to look at that Jorgensen person,” said Tur. “And she is not alone. There are thousands out there. They have discovered hormones, those things which make you female in all respects but one, and I understand that when you manhood has gone those things just take over. From that point you are all woman. Is that what you want?”

“You know I love you, Tur,” said Connie. “But just not in the same way that I love Brian.”

“I think you have made your decision then, my Love,” said Tur with a look of sadness that tore at Connie’s chest. “He’s a very lucky man.”

Do you remember how that story ends? The story I am talking about is “The Memory of Him”. Some say it is Constance Dunn’s best work, among all of the many bestsellers. Of course the heroine is not happy with just a memory. She has to have him. She runs to him, he sees her, he opens his arms, they kiss like no two people have ever kissed before, they marry, they live happily ever after.

Constance Dunn wrote the book, and then she lived it.

The End

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Erin’s Seed: “An out of work advertising guy starts reading his wife's romance novels in the 1950s and scoffs – “I could write better stuff than this!” His wife challenges … and soon he is a best selling romance writer …. But his publisher wants a tour so his wife agrees to stand in for him but just before the tour is to start, she runs off with her lover. He will fit the clothes and his publisher is willing to help cause they have made a lot of appointments for "her". It turns out the publisher has always been fantasizing that the author was female all along... romance develops.”

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