

Lutheran Writers Book Club

Discussion Materials

The Madhouse Nudes, by Robert Schultz

Introduction

The Madhouse Nudes, Robert Schultz's first novel, appeared in 1997 and has enjoyed a wide and enthusiastic readership since. The publishers of this novel tell us that it probes the question, "What does it mean for a man to see a woman truly?" In fact, the novel asks how any of us sees the truth at all—the truth about ourselves, our guilt and innocence, the motivations behind our work and play, the ways we affect others. Schultz takes on a compelling mystery in this novel, the question of who commits a certain shocking crime. Yet there is a greater mystery at the heart of *The Madhouse Nudes*—how we come to live with our blindness and brokenness, and whether we can grow into loving relation with our neighbors, as we find them.

This novel is about bodies—the nearly faultless bodies of John Ordway's young models, the broken bodies of people who are injured or attacked, the maimed and burned bodies we see on televised war coverage, the imperfect bodies who show up in church or the corner bar. Ordway is so fascinated with bodies that he has chosen the female nude as his artistic subject. He encounters a great deal of hostility for this choice, both from practicing artists who believe that the nude turns women into fetishes and commodities, and from less thoughtful people who suspect him of making simple pornography. Thoughtful readers realize that neither accusation is wholly true nor wholly untrue. John Ordway doesn't completely understand his work or the reasons he feels compelled to paint his favorite subjects. He is a man who is both curious about bodies and tormented about what happens to them. He is curious about why idealized nude bodies have been so compelling in Western art, and tortured because bodies he would have kept beside him—a sister who dies at age 18, and other women he has loved since—have, to his grief, gone away.

Bodies die. Perhaps this is a reason why John Ordway wishes to idealize bodies in his art, to preserve them as perfect and unchanging and ever-present. It may be a sub-conscious reason why he finds himself agreeing to attend Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday services at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Delphi, Iowa. These services commemorate—and do much more

than commemorate—the story of another death, another broken body. Ordway is not religious and has only entered churches to attend weddings and funerals until this Ash Wednesday service, when he attends to give comfort and support to people he works alongside at a sheltered workshop for developmentally disabled men and women. That day they have visited a young woman who lost her arm in a traumatic workplace accident, and John has heard news of a bombing in Baghdad that killed many civilians. Under these circumstances, Ordway finds himself joining the congregation in singing a hymn with these words:

Deep were his wounds, and red
On cruel Calvary,
As on the Cross he bled
In bitter agony.

Then Ordway ponders his experience at church: “The sensational crucifix on the bulletin cover and the words of the hymn called up some of the most difficult things I’d seen in the past months—war pictures from television, slaughterhouse scenes, Linda bloody on the floor of the [. . .] loading dock. My God! What a thing to be a body in this world!”

To be a body in this world: What can we vulnerable souls in fragile bodies do? When a physically and mentally challenged friend from the crew working at the sheltered workshop tells John that “In heaven we get new bodies,” and that “We’re forgiven. We’re all brand new, now,” John can only wonder at the claim. At church he was an invited stranger, an outsider who brought an unknowing eye to all he saw and experienced, and the implications for his own life remain largely obscure to him. But they nettle him, demanding attention and reflections that only a reader may be able to complete.

Questions:

1. This novel is epistolary—a collection of letters. (So, we recall, is the New Testament.) John Ordway writes a vivid letter, and we grow to like him and trust his observations. But can we trust him wholly? What are his blind spots, concerning art, concerning the women he lives with and near, concerning his culpability in the novel’s awful crime? What aspects of human perception and self-delusion become clearer as we read? Does the book alert us to perceptive ways to read letters, and to understand our own mixed motives?
2. Should we take sides in the novel’s debate about Ordway’s art? Jamie’s roommate Andrea and *The New Yorker*’s feminist art critic condemn John

for an art that exploits women for masculine pleasure. Late in the novel nearly an entire Lutheran congregation will seem to join in this condemnation—though for somewhat different reasons. And John himself goes back and forth on the question of whether he was right or wrong to burn one of his paintings. His friend Caroline offers another assessment late in the novel, reassuring John that his art is about calm rather than excitement, and about women kept safe rather than placed in danger. Who sees John and his art most accurately? Do you find yourself agreeing with one perspective or several? Do you think that John, or any other artist of our time, should paint idealized nudes? Nudes of any kind? On the other hand, what would be the result if we were to ask art only make paintings for living room walls, like the portrait John paints of the Stortz family?

3. This novel describes worship services in vivid detail. John Ordway, who feels “anthropological” in church, looks at the ecclesiastical artwork, notices with wonder the behavior of worshippers when they seem moved, senses a toughness in the Lutheran confession of sins, hears the tired language of sermons, and is surprised by the pastor’s welcoming handshake. Ordway is moved to tears by the sight of an entire congregation marked with a cross of ashes on their foreheads, but “squashes” those tears. How do John’s “anthropological” observations affect him? What is the effect on John of watching his friends worship? And what is the effect of the church supper where he and Caroline are shunned by the very people whose Christian acceptance of death had moved him to tears weeks earlier? In sum, what picture of the life of the church do we see through John’s inexperienced eyes?
4. The novel’s title makes reference to a series of drawings made in an insane asylum by Francisco Goya (1746-1828). It’s not surprising, in a way, that as John Ordway’s troubles mount he becomes more interested in Goya. The two had much in common. They painted nudes, under intense pressure not to (Goya’s resistance came from the Spanish Inquisition), they watched in horror as their nations went to war, and they felt deeply the pain of those whose bodies are tortured and maimed. One of the pictures Ordway cites, for example, *Heroic feat! Against the dead!*, shows the naked bodies of tortured soldiers on the battlefield, one separated from both its head and its bound arms. (This and all other pictures the novel cites can easily be found online, through the “Images” search of Ask.com or Google.com.) What does this novel suggest about the connection between realism and idealism in art? About the artist’s state of mind and his or her subjects? About the role of art in educating us about the ways we conduct our lives, and the costs of our decisions? Should art be a “mirror” that challenges us with often difficult images of the way things are? Or should it be a “lamp” that lights the way toward a better way of being? Is it possible for a work of art to be both a mirror and a lamp? What might all of this have to do with representing the human body in art?

5. What should we make of John's enraged kick of Ellen's door the very night she is attacked? What if the police had learned about it?
6. What does John Ordway learn about himself and his art when he comes under intense scrutiny and legal threat? Are the citizens of Delphi at all justified in their disgust with John? Should John expect more sympathetic treatment from them? Why do you think that acts perceived as sexual sins are so horrifying to people, while other cruel and negligent acts arouse little attention? Does the New Testament endorse such an attitude?
7. Spend some time thinking about the novel's conclusion. This particular book club might want to consider what it says about (predominantly) Lutheran communities and Lutheran churches. But we should also consider what kind of growth John Ordway has undergone, and whether that growth tells us something about authentic art, authentic relationships, and maybe even about the possibilities of authentic faith.

Author Q & A

1. *What was the novel's genesis?*

This is embarrassing but true: The first thing that came was the title, and I didn't know what it meant. I was painting my garage in Decorah on a hot summer day, my mind a dull blank, when the phrase dropped into it: "The Madhouse Nudes." It sounded like the title of something. I wondered what. I'd been looking at Goya drawings and had been particularly struck by some of the sketches he'd made in a "madhouse." And I'd read about English Enlightenment-era intellectuals visiting asylums to observe inmates who had lost their reason.

Another thing that fed into the mix was my reading of Laura Mulvey's critique of the "male gaze." Its exposure of how women are objectified and displayed for male delectation in films and other popular media struck me as true and devastating. At the same time, though, it left something out. It seemed to deny the possibility of a guiltless way of looking.

I suppose these two things had combined in my imagination to produce the title and my theme: The madhouse of contemporary American sexuality, with its clashes between Puritanism and pornography; prudery and childish voyeurism; moral admonition and vulgarity. And why, in American mainline Protestantism, with its powerful idea of incarnation, was there such ambivalence and skittishness about the human body?

So I started where I always tell my fiction-writing students not to start—with theme. Root your stories in the particulars of character, action, and place, I preach; to start with ideas too often leads to thin characters, argumentative plots, and readers who feel manipulated. So that's what I was up against.

But I had the advantage of not knowing what I finally thought about my theme, and I conceived of a character and situation in which I could explore questions rather than illustrate answers. Very quickly—instinctively—I knew that I wanted to write about a man, a painter, whose work was centered on the traditional female nude, and I would place him in challenging situations that would highlight issues of guilt and innocence.

2. *How did the novel change as you wrote it?*

It changed a lot. At first I thought I was going to write a book-length sequence of poems. I actually wrote three or four poems, and one them was later published in my book, *Winter in Eden*, as “Black Velvet.” But I quickly felt that I would need a more flexible, expansive form in which to develop my fictional world. I mentioned this to my friend, David Wyatt, who always reads my work in its early stages. I told him that I thought I needed to move from poetry to prose, and that I intended to make the book a fictional artist's workbook or journal. He thought the move to prose was a good idea, but said a journal might be too private and “airless.” “Write letters, instead,” he told me, “and to make them real, mail them to me.” David and I already corresponded regularly, so I said I'd give it a try. Writing in the letter form went well, and I bundled up a first batch and mailed them from Decorah to Charlottesville. I kept writing more letters and a couple of weeks passed. When I next heard from David I opened the letter, started to read, and was confused. I couldn't understand what he was talking about. Then I looked at the salutation and closing and saw that he had written to my character, John Ordway, in the persona of his correspondent, Wyatt Arends. I considered briefly the prospect of writing a collaborative epistolary novel with my friend, then called him on the phone and said, “Stop that!”

But the letter form suited me and I stuck with it. It gave the narrative a “near horizon,” so that John was only able to report on things as they happened. He couldn't foresee what would befall him next, and he wasn't recounting a story that he had already fully experienced. This was convenient for me, because as I went to my desk each day I didn't know what was going to happen next, either.

When the book was finished and my agent was sending it to publishers, an editor at a major New York house showed considerable enthusiasm but

balked at the epistolary form. She really seemed to understand what I was doing, however, and I thought she would be good to work with. So I took several months and re-wrote the whole thing, taking it out of the letter form. But when we re-submitted it, the book came back with no explanation. So I took another couple of months and put it all back into letters. But in this process I made some new discoveries, revised some things, and added a couple of new scenes. And the next time we sent the book out it was quickly accepted at Simon & Schuster.

Even after its first publication the book has changed a little. When it went to paperback I decided to restore a fictional preface by Wyatt Arends that I'd been persuaded to remove the first time around, and I decided to remove five consecutive paragraphs in a late scene that I decided were mistaken. Now, though, the book is closed. No more changes.

3. *Would you call yourself a Christian author or do you resist that label?*

I think writers generally resist labels, and I certainly wouldn't take on the job of labeling myself. I can imagine, though, that it might be interesting for readers in a "Lutheran Writers Book Club" to discuss what makes writing "Christian" or "Lutheran" or not.

For me, literature derives from a confrontation with experience prior to the formulation of doctrines, creeds, and religions. Literature tries to make its reports out of what Emerson called an "original relation" to things. And Whitman wrote famously about his point of view in "Song of Myself": "Creeds and schools in abeyance, / Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten . . ." And the American philosopher William James, in his great book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, noted the alternation between "prophetic" reports of individual spiritual experience and the organization of such reports into the communal structures of religions, denominations, and churches.

The value of art is that it is not an illustration of settled issues but a probing out into disputed terrain, areas of uncertainty, abiding mysteries. It refreshes our senses, expands our experience, and reminds us what it feels like to be alive. And when it does this it enlivens our reflections, including any "spiritual" or "religious" reflection we may do.

Having asserted that literature arises out of "pre-religious" experience, a question arises: Can artists really slip out of their points of view, their personal histories as Christians or Buddhists or pilgrims or atheists when they write?

Here are the facts of my personal history: I was raised within the Lutheran church, baptized and confirmed, and have taught for over 20 years at two Lutheran colleges. Concepts of grace, forgiveness, and communion have helped to shape my sensibility, and Martin Luther's famous essay "On Christian Liberty" is for me a touchstone text.

So we have a paradox. I've urged that literature best comes from a point of view prior to doctrines and creeds, and I've described how my point of view has been shaped by my life-long experience of Lutheranism.

One of the things I've always liked best about Lutherans is their willingness to live within paradox. The very thesis of Luther's "On Christian Liberty" is stated as a paradox to be explored: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none[;] a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." And when I taught at Luther College I admired its mission statement, which described its commitment to faith and learning in paradoxical terms. "This commitment," it declared, "places the response to God's truth in dialogue with the human quest for truth: faith expands and gives direction to this quest and is challenged by it." Especially important to me was that last phrase, "*and is challenged by it.*"

It has always seemed to me, therefore, that literature, as part of the human quest for truth, must regularly challenge any settled sense of "God's truth." The presumptions of certainty may comfort us, but they hold us within worlds always a little too small for the whole story. We know, as humans, that our truths are always partial, but artists work best when pursuing an ever-beckoning, ever-receding thing.

4. Have reviewers discussed *The Madhouse Nudes* in terms of religious ideas?

No, generally not. A review in the *Milwaukee Journal* did seem to have the theme of "incarnation" on its mind when it called the novel a book "about bodies . . . in all stages of imperfection and transitory radiance . . ." I liked that. It is a book about the body, about the human experience of living an embodied life, and I hope that got into my main character's various reactions as he looked and painted. Also, that's why I chose to include characters with physical and mental challenges, and to confront my painter with a model's Cesarean scar, and to dramatize the imposition of ashes at an Ash Wednesday service.

The book includes a perspective on the church from my protagonist's "unchurched" perspective, and the view isn't always pretty. Sometimes he's

moved and sometimes he's dismayed. I wanted to portray these reactions from the perspective of someone who's sees the congregation and its rituals through eyes innocent of much past experience with church.

Finally, though—to answer your question—most reviewers centered on the basic story involving a painter and his models and reactions to his work in a small, Midwestern town. But they noticed that the story has issues of right and wrong on its mind, that it's a book about a man looking at women and being shaken—partly by the way they look back at him—into an attempt to really see them.