

LOST IN THE STORY

My tart but loving partner Lynn has a mother who's driving her crazy. Her mother is 90 and lives 600 miles away. Lynn told me the other day: "I think I am literally losing my mind." I replied: "I'll look on EBay for a large strait-jacket."

"A *large* straitjacket?" she said. "You think I need a *large*?"

That moment was a tidy metaphor for the difference between men and women.

I've been thinking quite a bit about the differences between the sexes as I've spent the last month tinkering with a novel I've written which concerns a year in the lives of eight Rutgers freshmen. After a long fallow period, an editor expressed some interest in it, so I returned to the manuscript and am currently living somewhere deep inside the rewrite. The experience of spending this lightless, rainy winter living almost entirely within this story (while the gas meter cries like a bird in the basement) reminds me again what a deep, pure pleasure fiction offers.

Nearly every conversation I have these days with friends ends with a round-up of what stories we're following. *The Crown* is nearly always mentioned, and all those British police procedurals (*Scott & Bailey*, *Happy Valley*, *Broadchurch*) where the police chief is called "ma'am" or "gov." My favorite of these was *Line of Duty* – Jed Mercurio's drama about an internal

corruption unit investigating “bent coppers.” Here the boss is called “the gaffer,” and the best elements in this series are the twenty-minute-long scenes played in the interrogation room as a series of brilliantly unassailable villains begin to unravel before our eyes. These scenes play like theater pieces.

I remember watching all 20 episodes of the Danish version of *The Killing* (*Forbrydelsen*) in a rented cabin in Vermont. It was pouring outside; the chimney was leaking water into a soup pot. There was a single murder to solve, and it took 20 hours to solve it. Somewhere near the middle of this series, Lynn (in her petite straitjacket) turned to me and pulled out her lower lip, like a caught fish. “Fully hooked,” she managed to say. And that, indeed, was the lure of a well-crafted narrative. We were locked in. The characters’ lives felt as real as our own — more real, in a way.

I once showed up for jury duty in New Brunswick on the morning after the latest Harry Potter book had been released at midnight. One third of the entire jury pool was reading the novel. It was nine o’clock in the morning, and their bookmarks were already halfway through a 400-page novel. Remarkable.

I took a walk this morning, and a neighbor on Barnstable still had the white wooden letters JOY on his front lawn. Some part of me wanted to steal the J so it just read OY — which would capture well my feeling about this endless winter. But on the same street I saw a pile of abandoned children’s toys, and I thought once again about the power of stories. Children are permitted to tie beach towels around their necks and fly. They’re permitted to look at a

shrunk suburban backyard and see a fortress so enormous it can never be fully explored.

We adults are discouraged from tying beach towels around our necks. And so we lose ourselves in fiction, in film, in worlds of bent coppers and hyper-articulate Rutgers freshmen — worlds that never existed. Our lower lips are caught on the sharp hooks of our imaginations — and we are permitted to fully inhabit the world of others, at least for a while.