
**THE SEX
LIFE OF THE
AMOEBA**

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BARRY HEALEY



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For Carson

The characters and events in this book, of course, are not intended to resemble any incidents or persons living or dead. I myself am a fictional character and, as the reader knows, a fictional character can only write about other fictional characters. That is to say, the characters of a work of fiction by a fictional character are only figments of a vivid (and possibly disturbed) imagination. Whereas, this is not true of settings. By depicting actual locales, I'd hoped to add realism to my story so that these fictional characters could, for a few hundred pages, come to life and seem a little less fictitious.

I hope this is clear.

— SARAH FIELDING, JUNE 2014

I ONCE TOLD Vlad I thought I was asexual.

“A sexual what?” he asked.

“Not ‘a sexual,’ ‘asexual.’”

“What is *asexual*?”

“Without sex, at least, not involving sex.”

“An *asexual* is someone who is not having sex?”

“Yes.”

“Like us?”

“I can’t speak for you, but yes, on my side.”

I Vlad looked at me with pity, the Russian kind that flows from deep within the soul. “Sarah, I don’t want to pry but you are young woman having life with no sex?”

“Sort of, I mean, it’s not like I planned it or anything, it just happened, and it’s habit now, sort of.”

“Like marriage,” Vlad said wistfully.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“So asexuals, are they in favour of some-sex marriage?”

Vlad’s quips defuse your concerns only fleetingly. I had felt asexual since puberty. It wasn’t that I wasn’t passionate — I thought I might be, but I didn’t know. Mostly, I felt like an amoeba — sexless.

During my university years, I’d had a somewhat relationship with Brad who, at 30, was still writing his doctoral thesis on the mating habits of sea slugs (they were more passionate than we were) and wasn’t paying attention when it ended. I was articling, putting in long days at Butbung, Drucker & Warthogh, where none of the males were even remotely romantic

— none had passion potential — none. Romance is a knockdown from the right brain and lawyers (especially corporate ones) always lead with their left.

So after BD&W, I had doubts about a future in law. I wanted time to think and to travel but I had no money. So I went job hunting, which is how I met László.

“My movies,” he explained during the interview, “are sexy, but for sophisticate audience.” Like all Hungarians I’ve known (two), László is compact and stocky, has a vault full of charm, wears impeccably-tailored suits (without a tie), and smells like the cologne mart of a department store. Glancing at his watch, he nodded. “Come,” he said and, driving off in his ancient Mercedes, I wondered if this was a test.

“So tell me why you want to be secretary.”

“I don’t ... necessarily. I need to make money.”

“What you want money for?”

“To go to London.”

“London?”

“I want to see English theatre.”

“Ah, theatre,” he muttered. “When I go to theatre, I fall asleep. Actors talk too much. Not like movies which are vibrations of life. In movies, everything is possible.” Even though László immigrated here 17 years ago, his English remains in the experimental stage.

After a few blocks, he pulled into the parking lot attached to Wil-
lington Heights High School, stopping near a group of movie trucks. Zombies, vampires, witches and princesses stood near a catering table, eating buns, drinking coffee, smoking, gossiping, and peering at their cells. László strode past them into the gym, through the ‘Hal-
loween dance’ set, and down a hall to one of the classrooms, inside which movie lights, a camera and crew were focused on the teacher’s desk. Behind the desk sat a young, brown-skinned actor, French-kiss-
ing an older woman on his lap.

A rodent-like man yelled “Cut” when he saw László and everyone stopped.

“Good morning, everybody,” said László pleasantly, taking the rodent-like man aside. “I am looking at footage,” he said quietly, “and not seeing passion, so I show you what I want.” He took a paper from his pocket and, glancing at it, walked to where the actors were waiting.

“Good morning, Gloria, Jesus.”

“*Heysus*,” the actor said.

László peered at him.

“It’s pronounced *Heysus*.”

László glanced at the paper again and smiled at the woman. “This morning, we are shooting most important scene in movie. ‘Miss Jensen’ is teacher who is bored because students are deadheads except ‘Raoul’ who is excited by you — older sophisticated woman. In class he is looking sideways always to you and making trouble so you will look to him. He is sending vibrations to you, and you are thinking maybe you would like to feel young man’s passion. It is forbidden by school, but you think maybe he needs older woman. You are watching him. And you, ‘Raoul,’ are always looking at ‘Miss Jensen.’ She is most beautiful teacher in school, and you are most handsome student, so you are wanting each other, badly. Now we do take.”

László glanced at the Assistant Director.

“Lock it up, please,” the A.D. called out.

The actress sat at the desk, the actor standing a few feet away.

“Picture up.” As the camera rolled, László nodded at the rodent-like man who yelled: “Action.”

‘Raoul’ ambled up to the desk. “Ms. Jensen?”

The actress looked up.

“Why do I have to stay after class?”

“I thought we should have a talk.”

“About what?”

“Your lessons.”

“What about them?”

“You haven’t learned them.”

“Which ones?”

“Any of them. You’ve learned no geography this year. You don’t even know where the equator is.”

“I don’t need to know that.”

‘Ms. Jensen’ glanced at her report book. “You don’t like school, do you?”

“I like some school.”

“The young girls?”

“Nah. They don’t know nothing.”

“They don’t know *anything*.”

“Yeah, they’re not like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yeah, you know everything. This is like my favourite class.”

“It doesn’t show.”

“Yeah, well, that’s ‘cause I only like some kinds of geography.”

“What kinds?”

“Well ... I like *your* geography.”

“*My* geography?” ‘Ms. Jensen’ stared at him.

“Yeah, I’d like to study that.”

Now she was gazing at him, curiously. “Would you?”

“Yeah. I could be like one of those explorers.”

“Explorers?”

“You know, like those guys looking for the equator. I could look for your equator.”

She removed her glasses. “Do you think you could find my equator?”

“You betcha.”

“And what do you think you’d see there?”

“A big fiery volcano.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Now,” said László urgently.

‘Raoul’ pulled the older actress from the chair and, as their limbs clutched and grabbed each other, they clamped their mouths together.

“Pull her to desk. Push everything off. Lay her on top.”

Flailing out one arm, ‘Raoul’ swept the teacher’s desk clean and pushed ‘Miss Jensen’ onto her back.

“Now you are wanting her beautiful breasts.”

The actor fumbled with the top button of her dress.

“No, no, no. *Tear* it. You are crazy with desire.”

The actor ripped the dress open.

“Now you caress her breasts. You want her so much. And you, Ms. Jensen, want him so much you are undoing trousers.”

Awkwardly, as the actress fumbled with the actor’s pants, ‘Raoul’ began kissing her breasts. Both actors began to moan, pant and gasp, and simulate intercourse.

I was dumbfounded. I didn’t know where to look. I mean, I was embarrassed. I’d been taught by nuns, and it was ten o’clock in the morning. I was gaping at László who was focused intently on the scene. I looked at the crew who were casually watching and waiting for the actors to finish — the groping and moaning seemed to take forever. What were they thinking?

At that moment, I knew I didn’t want the job.

Finally, László nodded at the director who yelled: “Cut and print.”

“Good,” pronounced László, nodding at the actors. Taking the director aside, he said quietly: “In close-ups I need to see passion and breasts. Make them go for it.”

Back in the Mercedes, he seemed ebullient. “So, Sarah, what you think?”

“It was interesting,” I said politely, still dazed. “Where do you sell these ... movies?”

“Everywhere.”

“People *buy* them?”

“Of course, I can afford to pay top salary to executive secretary with degree in law. You will come work for me.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“No?”

“I’m a feminist,” I said pointedly.

“I am feminist too,” László said. “I know many women who are friends.”

I was stunned. “Do *they* watch your movies?”

“Of course.”

“And they *like* them?”

“Everyone wants to see people wanting each other. It is only natural; but in this country when you make movie of this they think it is ‘porno-graffe’. They do not understand it is healthy to see sex in movie. You are intelligent woman, I can tell. This is crazy business, and I need smart woman to tell me what women think, and what they desire, and to make ideas for women’s movies. I think you would be good for this.”

“What do you mean ‘what women think’?”

“What they want. Career ... husband ... lover? How they can see who they want to be. How they can live. What kind of movie they are watching. I need smart feminist woman to tell me this.”

László’s flattery always sounds sincere, and probably is — no doubt he could persuade a leopard to change its spots (“you would look much sexier in stripes”) — so I was conflicted. His offer was tempting, but I still hesitated. I had checked out the Felicity Pictures website, which seemed obsessed with sex — in a wide variety of positions and locales. And yet, László was against pornography, so what kind of company would I be working for?

As we neared his office, the argument was being thrashed out in my head. The nuns had said ‘no’ emphatically, but László was insisting that he needed me. Naturally, I was flattered (I have low self esteem), but beyond that the job, as I understood it, was less boring than corporate law (no kidding); the money was good; and I was tired of job-hunting. I liked László and he seemed to like me. And I would only have to do it until I had saved enough for London. Shouldn’t I at least try it? Maybe, as a feminist, I could make a difference.

“Could I try it for a month?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll take it.”

THAT MONTH WHIZZED by. After the first week, it was easy to see what could be improved to make Felicity Pictures more efficient. I put László on a schedule (at which at first he balked); set up deadlines and task lists for the staff and created a data base program for monitoring the progress on all Felicity's projects. I seemed to have a talent for this (without having an MBA), so László insisted I stay on. I did, and after completing HALLOWEEN HOODOO, he offered me the position of associate producer — in lieu of the raise I'd asked for — and gave me my own office, a former utility room (broom closet) next to the stairwell.

Now I had two jobs: associate producer *and* László's girl Friday. I had to cancel my plans for London every few months because the work load never let up. Although I was managing fine, and I knew László was pleased, by the time we'd finished shooting FIELD OF SCREAMS, nine months later, the job had begun to affect my health.

I was having trouble sleeping. I had recurring nightmares of being caught naked in a crowd, frantically trying to cover myself with my hands. I woke four or five times a night in a cold sweat, relieved to find myself under my quilt. This is an actual psychological disorder — nudophobia (I looked it up) — but I knew it was the nuns chiding me. I was paying actresses \$500 a day to strip and simulate copulation. To believe that this bettered the lives of women everywhere was delusional; but of course that only caused me to smother my feminist side all the more. I had no one to talk to; and I was too busy to have a

social life or a boyfriend (with Brad and László as role models, I was having difficulty seeing men as romantic objects).

László, of course, wasn't deluded — he was demented. In his world, Felicity's movies shared the screen with those acclaimed French films which also featured an abundance of nudity and love-making. He was unable to see that *his* movies lacked subtlety, irony, character and — until Vlad arrived — story. László knew how to get a picture made; he just didn't know how to make one. He was a producer, not a filmmaker. And my slow realization of this only extended my depression and sleepless nights. I realized I had to get out.

I'd decided to tell László I was quitting the day before prep on *KISS MY ASS*, but then he introduced me to his new director, Vladimir Pudovkin. Meeting Vlad, an intelligent, witty, six foot three, meaty Euro-Russian, saved me. It was like finding a long-lost brother.

Shaking my hand firmly, and eyeing me (an earnest, naïve 25-year-old), he said, "László tells me you are finest associate producer he has worked with."

"I know, he says that to everyone."

"I don't know if you are finest," he said without the flicker of a smile, "but you must be wackiest to work with Hungarian lunatic."

It was instant simpatico. We knew why we were there — money. As the associate producer, I made sure László's pay cheques were never late, a rarity in the picture business, or so Vlad assured me. We also shared the same work ethic (on set, I often heard him mutter, "Maybe we can make this shit smell little sweeter.").

So making those two pictures with Vlad was revelatory. From him, I learned about movies, art and life; and, for a time, the nuns' voices were muted, even though I still hadn't resolved my moral dilemma. Meanwhile, Vlad fought ceaselessly with László (art versus commerce) to give the actors dignity and to raise the tone of our pictures, trying to show him a more sophisticated and intelligent method of making movies. During many of those twelve-hour days, it seemed

like a losing battle. Halfway through *KISS MY ASP*, I noticed Vlad looking morose. “What’s up?” I asked.

“I think László is winning. I was just working out how to make slow dolly shot close-up on breasts.”

Vlad understood the war between business and integrity, and he did the best he could with what he had. Our pictures were well directed — still exploitative — but less offensive, even artful in places. Even so, during those two years, Vlad and I continually urged László to aim higher; and as a result, four months previously, he surprised us by putting me in charge of a new department. I became Head of Quality Development (Hungarians have a sly lack of wit) with no increase in salary, authority or perks (my desk remained in the broom closet); and although I still had to function as László’s associate producer *and* girl Friday, Vlad and I felt we had established a beachhead.

As HQD (as Vlad now referred to me), once a week I had to present László with ideas for ‘quality’ movies. I saw new plays, read stories, novels, and the unsolicited scripts that arrived daily in the mail; but whatever I presented, he rejected.

Vlad smiled when I complained. “How difficult can it be,” he said, “to find quality screenplay with excessive copulation?”

László’s constant rejection left me discouraged and angry. I told him it was a waste of my time, but he was adamant I continue — his way, I suppose, of pretending that we weren’t going to go on making schlock. So I kept searching, relentlessly, for a worthy story he would want to produce, but was still unable to stifle the nuns’ voices in my head. Vlad, meanwhile, was fed up with making (what he called) ‘flicky-flicky-bang-bang movies’. Those were tense days.

What follows is the story of finding Honor’s novel; and the subsequent making — or rather, unmaking — of the picture. I know this account won’t be entirely accurate but by using all available sources (emails, cell records, my journal, script notes, and interviews with those involved — in some cases having to assume what was said and

who said it), I think it's as close as I can come to explaining what happened — and how. Some of those moments I found embarrassing to relive — behaviour under stress can result in the farcical rather than the tragic — but it is intended as a cautionary tale, so I sincerely hope the reader will find the story not only engaging but morally instructive.

IT IS SAID that *The Smoke Pickers*, Honor Lamprey's period love story set on a tobacco farm in southwestern Ontario, is likely her most Canadian novel. I'd read a glowing review ("an exquisitely passionate tale") and, thinking it might have potential as a quality picture, I drove across town to Goode's Booke Emporium one warm August evening where Honor was giving a reading. Squeezing into the shop, its tall replica-Victorian shelves crammed with new and pre-owned books, I was immediately besieged by a pack of expensively-dressed, middle-aged women — each one clutching a copy of Honor's book, all blitzed on white wine, and all loudly gabbing. The kind of woman I imagine who parks her SUV next to the mall planter just before the shrubs disappear.

Through a gap in the crowd, I spotted Honor sitting next to the makeshift podium, calmly sipping tea and flashing her acclaimed-author's smile about the room like a beacon. She resembled an ageing (fiftyish?) cherub, her lined, seraphic pink face under a mound of dyed burgundy hair, both of which complemented her dark green designer suit. She was unfazed by the noise which didn't lessen when Emerson Goode, in crumpled black suit and tie, tried to address the crowd.

"Attention," he said hesitantly. "Could I have your attention, please? We're about to begin."

Tonight is a special night for us. It's a great privilege for Goode's to be able to welcome internationally-celebrated author Honor Lamprey whose depiction of Canadians and life in this great country is always

rendered with a deft touch. I know we're all proud of her many achievements, but I think *The Smoke Pickers* might be her most important work yet. Please welcome Honor Lamprey."

Honor stepped up to the podium, gazing calmly out at the audience silently atwitter as, at the back, a few young cyber-fans twittered silently.

"*The Smoke Pickers*," she announced, her acrid voice deadening the remaining chatter, "takes place in 1968. The tragic story of the love affair between Maddie, the young wife of a middle-aged tobacco farmer, and Miguel, a Guatemalan migrant worker, it's set in that corner of my memory where I came of age, the flat, fertile farmland of Southwestern Ontario — an endless chasm of long, hot summer days, sweating in fields redolent of leafy green tobacco, or lazing in the shade of a brick Victorian farmhouse porch, sipping lemonade — and sometimes something stronger. It was evocative for me to write and I hope it will be as vivid for you to read."

She put on her glasses, opened the book and began:

"The day broke like a fresh farm egg, the sun bursting like some giant yolk pouring onto toast, soaking its buttery rays into the secret burnt corners that had been stove-black an hour before. And, like an industrious ant colony, the migrant workers emerged from the squalid bunkhouses preparing for the long, arduous day ahead; some washing from the trough; some holding bowls and chewing the stiff, tasteless porridge that old Matthews served; and some, like Miguel, squatting against the bunkhouse walls, smoking and staring out at the still, verdant fields.

"His eyes flickered when Maddie stepped out onto the farmhouse porch. She ignored the workers, not daring to glance in their direction for fear of seeing Miguel and being overcome with that same hot quivering that had made her

tremble before him the night before. He also tried to avoid looking at her, but found his eyes fastened on her tied-back flaxen hair and her long, shapely legs as she strode across the yard to the old Ford.

“He glanced away, sniffing the air, stiff with the stench of the workers’ cigarettes, the scent of fresh tobacco and now with the exhaust of the old truck, which had coughed to life and was slowly driving past Miguel. His eyes sought hers. Seeing him, she quickly averted her gaze; and the Ford, an industrial-age relic relying more on good faith than technical proficiency, sputtered forward, carrying her down the long elm-lined driveway.”

At this point, Emerson had leaned back and knocked Honor’s teacup to the floor. She read on, ignoring the clatter, finishing to great applause. Emerson hurriedly rang in sales of the book, and a line formed in front of the signing table, behind which Honor — reminding me of Sister Fiona — sat imperiously. The line finally dwindled to the girl in front of me. “Ms. Lamprey, you’re like my favourite writer, and *The Smoke Pickers* is like so beautiful, I want to like get one for my sister. Can you like sign it ‘to Kathleen?’”

“Of course.”

“Is it like based on a true story?”

“I made it up.” Honor smiled. “It’s what we writers do.”

“It was like so real.”

“Thank you.”

“When Maddie went off with like Miguel, it was like that girl on TV who eloped with that guy from like Guatemala.”

Watching the girl walk off, Honor grimaced slightly then automatically smiled up at me as I stepped forward to hand her my copy of the book. “Could you sign it ‘for László, please, L-a-s-z-l-o. You read so elegantly.”

She smiled modestly and began to write the inscription.

“Can you tell me,” I asked, “if the movie rights are available?”

Her eyes darted up, flashing me a look I’d seen once before when László had offered a writer cash for his screenplay, and the writer’s face had gone from surprise to joy to disbelief in a fraction of a second. Then, quickly, she affected to be uninterested. “I’m sorry, your name is Laz ...?” she asked, trying to focus on the inscription.

“No, I’m Sarah Fielding. Mr. Kovac’s associate.” I gave her my business card which she took carefully, holding it delicately between the tips of her fingers.

“Yes, I believe, the rights are *still* available,” she said casually, as though it were of no importance, but staring at my card as if it might hold some hidden meaning. “My agent has had a number of inquiries of course ... but I believe ... they are ... still available.” She smiled hopefully, to welcome any offer that might be forthcoming.

“Good, well, I hope to be in touch with you soon. Thank you,” I said, clutching the book. “I shall look forward to reading it.” As I walked away, I glanced back. She was still staring at my card.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

During the 1970s and 80s, Barry Healey wrote television variety for such performers as Milton Berle, Arte Johnson, Soupy Sales, Bob Crane, Andy Griffith, Sally Kellerman, Jackie Mason, Henry Mancini, Van Johnson and others. His motion picture credits include the award-winning shorts: *OUTTAKES* (1978) writer/director/producer; *THE NIGHT BEFORE THE MORNING AFTER* (1979) writer/director; and the feature films: *THE GREY FOX* (1982) co-producer; *ONE MAGIC CHRISTMAS* (1985) writer; *BIG DEAL* (1985) director; *HOLLYWOOD NORTH* (2003) writer. *The Sex Life of the Amoeba* is his first novel. Barry lives in Toronto.