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## Where'd All The Fun Go?

**BYLINE:** Deborah Tannen**SECTION:** BOOK WORLD; PAGE X1**LENGTH:** 2385 words

This is one of a series of occasional essays by authors on subjects that concern them in their creative lives.

CLANCY SIGAL, who once lived with the Rhodesian-raised writer Doris Lessing, protested in an essay that Rose O'Malley, the South African-born writer in his *The Secret Defector*, was not Doris Lessing. "First and foremost," he explained, he had wanted his character Rose to be "a proto-feminist, which Mrs. Lessing has always denied she is or was." And, he added, Mrs. O'Malley probably didn't have much of a sense of humor, "which Mrs. Lessing privately always had."

This caught my interest. Why did Sigal want his character to be humorless if the woman who inspired the character was not? And why did he want his woman-writer character to be "a proto-feminist" instead of just a woman writer? Was it his desire to make her a proto-feminist that made him want to rid her of a sense of humor? Somehow it reminded me of the old joke: Question: How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Answer: That's not funny!

These issues interest me because I have seen myself transformed into characters in other people's artistic creations four times; one of my books has even become a character in a television show. And in all these transformations of my life into someone else's art, I have been stripped of my sense of humor.

The most recent and most widely disseminated appearance of my words in a fictional creation is a scene in the film "White Men Can't Jump." But the scene doesn't come out of any of my books; it comes out of my life.

This is how I figure my life got into the film. About two years ago I was interviewed by a reporter for the Los Angeles Times about my book *You Just Don't Understand*. Like many other questioners, she asked how my husband was handling the book's success. (That I am so often asked this question could be the subject of another essay: How often are successful men asked how their wives are "handling" their success, as if it were a disaster, or a snake?) I answered that he was pleased and proud, and sympathetic to my frustration at having to repeat the same sound bites for one after another television, radio, or print interviewer. In fact, I said, he had amused us both just the other day in this regard. We had finished dinner and were sitting at the dining room table. I said I was thirsty, and he made a move to get me a glass of water. But then he stopped himself, saying, "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." He sat back down, looked at me with exaggerated sympathy, and said, "I know what it's like to be thirsty. I was thirsty once." This playfully satirized one of my more frequent riffs: that often a woman describes a problem but does not want to be summarily offered a solution; instead, she wants to talk about the problem and feel understood. My husband's mock dialogue was a send-up of the examples he had heard me repeat to demonstrate how women typically respond to each other's "troubles talk." We both found it hilarious because we both knew it was absurd.

It was the Los Angeles Times reporter who made the first transformation. She presented the conversation without making it explicit that it was intended as a joke. (I can't tell if she missed the fact that it was funny, or purposely presented it deadpan.) But she reproduced the conversation in her interview accurately in text, if incomplete in spirit. In the film, however, the setting has been moved from the dining room table into bed. Gloria, sluggishly (and nakedly) waking first, shakes Billy from a

sound sleep to mumble that she's thirsty. This considerate fellow drags himself out of bed and brings her a glass of water. Instead of thanking him, she trounces the guy, giving him a lecture about how he should have said that he understood what it feels like to be thirsty instead of doing something to solve her problem. The audience has a good laugh and probably sympathizes with Billy when he throws the water in her face, leaps from the bed, and stamps out of the house in disgust.

Now, I know that complaining about this scene will lay me open to accusations of having no sense of humor. The scene is, after all, very funny -- funny enough to be singled out by reviewers and met with loud laughter in theaters. Obviously I'm flattered (Who wouldn't be?) to find my ideas entering the public discourse. It would be disingenuous of me to complain about that. But still I can't help wondering why what began, in my life, as a conversation in which a man and woman laughed together has become a scene in which the woman is the butt of the joke. In the real conversation, the woman, who happened to be me, saw the humor. But in the movie, the audience laughs at Gloria because she utters an absurd travesty of a gripe, and because she takes herself completely seriously.

Perhaps my reaction to this twist was intensified because it's happened to me before. Two other times -- in a film and a play -- it wasn't my conversation that was portrayed, but my persona: a linguist who analyzes conversations.

Some years ago I was reading a review of Wayne Wang's film "Chan Is Missing" in Newsweek. The reviewer cited what he regarded the funniest scene in the movie: A young woman writing her doctoral dissertation in linguistics on Chinese-American cross-cultural communication analyzes a conversation that she overheard at a traffic accident with the bulky academic term "complementary schismogenesis." The scene is funny because the woman gives such a long and technical explanation for such a mundane event -- and because she takes herself so seriously.

My antennae started beeping. I had written my doctoral dissertation in linguistics on cross-cultural communication (not between Chinese and Americans at traffic accidents but between New York Jews and non-Jewish Californians at a Thanksgiving dinner), and I had used Gregory Bateson's term "complementary schismogenesis" to explain why the New York Jews were perceived as dominating the conversation. This was too much of a coincidence. I stared at the filmmaker's name, then remembered and located an old address book. Sure enough, Wayne Wang was the young man who had come to my office at the University of California, Berkeley to talk to me about cross-cultural communication. He had borrowed a copy of my dissertation, which he returned with a polite note about how useful he had found it. He'd said he was working in a Chinese community center; he hadn't said he was a filmmaker. I didn't mind his using me as the model for a character in his film. Quite the contrary, again I was flattered. But when I saw the film, I squirmed because he had made his woman-linguist character utterly humorless. Part of the reason I like the term "complementary schismogenesis" is that I know that its polysyllabic form can be comical. I never introduce it into conversation with lay people with a straight face.

The next time I glimpsed my life in art I had been forewarned. When I finished my dissertation, I wrote an article in New York magazine: a tongue-in-cheek take on New York conversational style. I received a lot of mail in response to that piece, including a letter from a New York-born playwright, Glen Merzer, who was intrigued by my description of New York conversations. He too asked to see my dissertation, and I sent it off; when he returned it, he informed me that he was writing a play inspired by it. I was delighted. As he wrote the play, which he titled "Taking Comfort," Merzer sent me drafts for my comments. It was about a New York woman getting a PhD in linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. She invites a group of friends to Thanksgiving dinner for the sole purpose of tape recording their conversation as data for her dissertation. The play was of course very different from my dissertation, although Merzer borrowed (with my permission) a few funny lines word for word from the dialogue at the Thanksgiving dinner on which my dissertation was based, and the play's characters and setting corresponded roughly to those at the real dinner. I read drafts of Merzer's play with admiration and eagerly suggested small changes to make the details more accurate (for example, that scholars don't get paid for articles in journals; they're lucky if they get a free copy of the journal).

I liked "Taking Comfort" and was tickled to see my life transformed into a play. (As a recent PhD doing a rather unorthodox kind of linguistics, I appreciated each piece of evidence that what I was doing interested people.) What was hard to take was that in his rendering, Merzer had made the linguist into a rather irritating person. She places a huge tape recorder in the middle of the table, strings a large microphone from the ceiling in her friends' faces, and then exhorts them to forget the tape recorder, exhorting them when they don't. In the end, it turns out that she has tricked them in an especially

cruel way -- there isn't any turkey in the oven. The audience can't help but sympathize with the guest who rips the tape out of the tape recorder and stomps on it.

I tried to get Merzer to make the linguist more sympathetic, arguing on the aesthetic grounds that a play is more effective if the audience is made to care what happens to the characters, and that an audience is more likely to care about characters they like. But underneath, I was hurt: Why did he think the linguist had to be humorless and mean?

My next experience with fictionalization is more upbeat. David Carkeet (a novelist with a masters degree in linguistics) wrote a novel *The Full Catastrophe* about a linguist who moves into a couple's home to diagnose their conversational disorders. Again it was a review that tipped me off. The headline -- "Honey, the Linguist is Here" -- caught my eye. When I got to the reference to complementary schismogenesis, I hadn't much doubt. (Not only filmmakers and novelists but reviewers seem to find that term as absurdly amusing as I do, when it is used in a conversational context.) I bought and read the book, and sure enough found passages strikingly similar to ones I had written in *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Your Relations With Others*. A letter to the author confirmed that he'd gotten the idea for his book from *That's Not What I Meant!* and had based his explanation of complementary schismogenesis on mine. I didn't much mind, because at last here was an author who had made the linguist sympathetic. But there was a new hitch here: Carkeet had turned the linguist into a man.

My fifth and final brush with being fictionalized is the television situation comedy "Home Improvement" about a man who hosts a television talk show on how to fix things but in reality can't fix much of anything (either mechanical or relational) when he's at home. The studio's press materials are explicit: The series was 'inspired by Robert Bly's *Iron John* and my *You Just Don't Understand*. Executive producer Matt Williams is quoted as saying, "Actually, Deborah Tannen's book probably has more to do with this series than Robert Bly's, because her book deals with the fact that men and women speak different languages. They'll never be able to communicate, because they approach the world from different points of view. That right there is the piston that drives this television series." Whenever the home improvement guru has a problem with his wife (which he does in each episode), he wanders into his backyard and consults over the fence with his neighbor Wilson, who enlightens him about the differences between men and women. The wisdom Wilson dispenses is sometimes paraphrased, sometimes taken verbatim, from Bly's book or mine, mostly mine. In this case, I have no quarrel with the Wilson character or with his appropriating my words. But I regret that here again the voice of authority had to be a man's.

This made me wonder whether the very idea of a woman, especially a youngish one, trying to speak as an authority isn't an irresistible source of amusement in itself, because it strikes many people as incongruent. To be likable, women are expected to be unassertive and to smile often. An authority, on the other hand, should be serious to gain respect. A woman who refrains from smiling comes across as stern, severe, and everything else associated with the eminently risible icon of female authority, the schoolmarm. Hence, any woman who tries to speak authoritatively runs the risk of being seen as humorless and taking herself too seriously.

In wondering why my life in art has been so humorless, I realize that it's easier to laugh at those who are unable to laugh at themselves. Yet there may be a deeper reason why women in particular are so often made laughable by being depicted as having no sense of humor. As linguist Wallace Chafe has put it, laughter is a disabling mechanism. Therefore, making others laugh is a way of exerting power over them, however fleetingly. This may be why women are expected to be the audience to jokes, not the on-stage tellers who knowingly put others temporarily out of commission by making them laugh.

In the play "Conversations with my Father," the authoritarian and stony-faced father refuses to laugh at his wife's jokes. The grown son, peering into his childhood from the distance of memory, shouts at his father, "That's funny! Why don't you laugh?" The father doesn't answer, and doesn't laugh; one senses that he wants to be the one reducing others to appreciative chortles; he doesn't want to be the one reduced, and he doesn't want to yield center stage.

Which brings me back to Clancy Sigal's character Rose O'Malley, and why he wanted to make her an unfunny proto-feminist. A feminist is a type, and with that type comes a convenient set of characteristics easily recognized by readers, including the humorlessness so frequently attributed to feminists in jokes. And a linguist? Is this a type in the making? If so, maybe there will follow a new set

of jokes. Something like -- Question: How many women linguists does it take to screw in a light bulb?  
Answer: None. We listen well enough in the dark.

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1 of 1

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