



THE TRAGEDY QUEEN

LINDA LEITH

A GUIDE FOR BOOK CLUBS

LIVING IN A FICTIONAL WORLD

A Letter from Linda Leith

In a house in Dorval, Quebec, in the spring of 1994, I sat in a living room while the members of a reading group asked me questions about my first novel, *Birds of Passage*, about how I got started writing fiction, about my life in Budapest. One woman in particular was interested, I remember, in a scene in which one character gives crystallized violets to another. She was disappointed to learn that I'd made the whole scene up. There were some tentative—and tactful—questions, too, about the marriage breakup in the novel, so that, when my husband appeared at the door to pick me up, he was prevailed upon to come indoors so they could have a good look at him before we were both released into the night.

What these women in Dorval wanted to know was exactly what I want to know when I see Margaret Drabble on television, when I hear Carol Shields interviewed on CBC radio. How much of a novel is “true”? It's a real question, an inevitable question. I myself love listening to what writers say in interviews. For—deny it as we often will—there is no doubt that we all do, in some way or another, write out of our own experiences. I don't know if it's possible not to do so. Even a novel set on a distant star will have come out of the life its author leads here on earth. Some of our own preoccupations always emerge in everything we write, even in a review of a book by someone we've never met. When we put pen to paper, we cannot help but reveal ourselves.

But how much? How much is true? How much is fiction?

In my own case, part of the answer is easy. I set my novels in real, recognizable places. The Budapest of *Birds of Passage* and the Pointe Claire of *The Tragedy Queen* are as “true” as I could make them. I use some events, too, that really happened—the taxi strike in *Birds of Passage*, for example, and the scandal caused by the statue of David at Fairview mall in *The Tragedy Queen*. But other events and circumstances are either changed beyond recognition or entirely my own invention. It all depends on what I needed to make it work as a novel. My allegiance is to the

novel, not to history. And when it comes to characters, I give myself free rein. I remember hearing one British writer interviewed recently who said that she had all her main characters born—as she was—in 1945 so that at least she could be sure she’d get the background right. I don’t do that. Alice, in *Birds of Passage*, is younger than I am, and Gábor—like Sal, in *The Tragedy Queen*, quite a bit older. Vince is my age, because he went to the same high school I went to, and it helped to know what the school was like in the mid-1960s. You do need to get some things right—and to know certain kinds of details—if you’re going to be convincing.

I could tell you more. If I were sitting in your living room with your reading group, I could tell you where this detail or that comes from—where I heard about a tattoo of the five of dominoes, who really smoked Balkan Sobranies, and where the bomb really went off. But I couldn’t add anything very important to your reading of *The Tragedy Queen*. If it seemed important, it went into the novel. So, for example, I couldn’t tell you any more about Vince and Sal than you can find out by reading the novel.

When a review of *The Tragedy Queen* appeared in *The Gazette* here in Montreal, illustrated by a large picture of a man on a Harley Davidson with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, my sister called me up to congratulate me. And then she laughed. “So *that’s* what Vince looks like!”

I laughed too. I have my own idea about what Vince looks like, my sister has hers, you will have your own. In *The Tragedy Queen* I’ve sketched in his physical appearance only lightly. It’s up to you to fill in the details, to imagine him—and the other characters—for yourselves. That’s one of the beauties of reading a novel. You get to read into it. To imagine. To make it your own.

If I were in your living room with your reading group, I would tell you what I could. But I would listen, too. In the questions you would ask and the comments you would make about *The Tragedy Queen*, I would hear about a novel you have made your own.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME TO SET A NOVEL
Exploring the Real Pointe Claire with Linda Leith
by Denise Roig

They're tan, well coiffed and walk with a bounce in their step, these women in twos and threes with golf clubs on their shoulders. It's midday, mid-week and the world is theirs. There's not a man in sight. The perfect setting, the perfect opportunity for Vince Carlson, ladykiller and lout, to spring into action.

"See? That's the escarpment. That's where Vince looked for fossils when he was a boy." Through the car window, Linda Leith waves at a sheer face of rock, and, not for the first time today, the real and the fictional blur.

Leith is the author of *The Tragedy Queen*, a novel just out from Nuage Editions. The main character, a "sweetheart swindler" named Vince Carlson (aka Wincenty Cunningham, aka N. Vince Ybl, aka A.S. Windle, aka Tad Wilde) preys on women of a certain age—bored women, romantically neglected women, rich women. His hunting ground? The very real Montreal suburb of Pointe Claire, the West Island bedroom community recently hailed by *L'Actualité* as the most desirable place to live in Quebec, the home Belfast-born Leith knew as a teenager and reclaimed 17 years ago as an adult.

"See? We're back on Cartier Avenue," she says. Only now, after this tour through the lovely, leafy streets of Pointe Claire, after seeing the places inhabited not just by Vince and Sal, the tragedy queen of the title, but by the novel's engaging co-stars, it looks different. More interesting, less innocent.

We drive past the public swimming pool—a haven in humid summer months, another stage on which Vince performs for the ladies—down the street where the novel's "black garden" once thrived. All that's left are a few irregular slabs of shale pressed into the ground, an interrupted sunburst. The garden, Leith explains, was leveled a few years ago when neighbours complained about the environmental (make that aesthetic)

damage it was causing the community. Is this the friendly pocket of prosperity it appears to be? What *is* the price of living in paradise?

A longtime resident who's just read *The Tragedy Queen* told Leith he'll never look at Pointe Claire again the same way. "I was happy to hear that," says Leith over an outdoor lunch at a nouvelle-Italian restaurant in Pointe Claire village, just blocks away from the golf course. "You try to get people to look at things in a slightly different way."

She looks up at the sky just at that moment. It's a gray day in late May, warm enough to sit outside, but not without a sweater, and not without looking up occasionally to wonder. "After all, as a novelist that's what you're after," she says and flashes one of her surprise smiles. There is a reserve about Leith, a dignity, helped along by a continental accent. Until she smiles.

Leith wasn't after anything in particular when she began writing fiction for the first time five years ago. Finding herself in Budapest with her husband and three sons for a two-year stay, in the midst of "a world gone topsy-turvy, with everything up for grabs," finding herself with free time for the first time in years, Leith began to write.

At first these were more like journal entries, a logging of descriptions of places and events, such as the taxi strike that nearly brought the city to its knees. Originally the notes were to be used for a travel story or a scholarly essay. Leith, who has taught English literature at John Abbott College for the past 20 years, was already known for her literary criticism and scholarly writing. In the past decade, she was editor of *Matrix* magazine, fiction editor for Véhicule Press, wrote *Introducing Hugh MacLennan's Two Solitudes* and edited *Telling Differences: New English Fiction from Quebec*. As Leith says, "All my professional life I'd been writing about other people's writing."

But Leith's Budapest notes started turning into something else: her own writing. When she returned to Montreal in the summer of 1992, she was in possession of a novel. Not just a novel, a *fine* novel, according to all the reviews when *Birds of Passage* was published by Nuage in 1993.

She also had a terrible shock in store. The family's Pointe Claire home had been ravaged by a tenant, a disbarred lawyer who'd rented through a real-estate agent. Not only had the man failed to pay rent, he'd sold nearly everything they owned. As Leith says now, "There weren't even enough dishes to make a simple meal."

In the incident, however, she found the makings for her second novel. Leith is quick to point out that she never actually met the bad-news tenant and quick to emphasize that *The Tragedy Queen* is a work of the imagination. Checking the sky again—it does seem to have gotten darker between the salad and the main course—she tries to explain the way she works.

“It’s a bit like a trampoline,” she says. “You place your feet on the real and then you spring up. You do a few somersaults and then you land again.”

But Leith lands only to spring. For her, fiction is much more interesting than real life. What is most interesting for her in the real, the actual, is place. “When I write, I need a base that’s solid. Place has been that for me in both novels. I begin with a place and I get that as right as I can.”

For anyone who’s read *The Tragedy Queen* and knows Pointe Claire, the likeness is startling. One West Island friend who recently read the novel claimed she could hear the wind moving in the maples, could feel the July heat that turns everything still.

It’s fun, too, finding familiar markers: the restaurant that was once a dressmaker’s, the shoe-repair store, the convent—all places that Vince Carlson rediscovers when he returns to Pointe Claire after 30 years’ absence. Leith has gotten this particular corner of the world as right as she could write it.

But what about Vince, the con without a conscience, the bundle of contradictions who loves Jessye Norman and rides a Harley, the snake who is also a charmer? Where does he come from? Readers can’t help but be struck by the way Leith gets inside this male character who takes women for a ride, takes them for their money, and worse: wishes them harm.

“It was difficult,” Leith admits, “to get that right balance of appeal and villainy. Vince is an unconventional man, which is why he scandalizes people so deliciously. He’s such a *bad guy*.” She shudders dramatically, then breaks into another surprise smile. “He was fun to play with.”

The play included a fair amount of reading on criminal behavior. One book, called *Without Conscience*, made a particularly chilling impact. Transcripts from the testimony of sweetheart swindlers in which they boasted of their exploits also provided a “wonderful mine of information,” says Leith.

So did her memories of being a student at Beaconsfield High School during the '60s, the same school where Vince struggles and fails to fit in. "Vince is like me in some ways," says Leith. What ways exactly? There's a long pause. "The differences are more obvious," she finally says.

The sky is getting close to charcoal now. Perhaps a sudden downpour will save her from having to answer. But Leith is clearly intrigued by what she's started. "We both love Jessye Norman and share a taste for chèvre salad," she says, laughing. (That's the gourmand salad made with chèvre, pine nuts, bacon and endive that ultimately leads to Vince's undoing.) Yes, there's a mutual appreciation of beauty and good taste, and while Leith won't actually come out and say this, a shared intelligence and attentiveness to others.

And something else. "Some of Vince's outsider observations about this pretty little suburb are thoughts that might have flitted across my mind, too," she admits. "Even though I've lived here a long time, some part of me still sees this place as an outsider."

Time to go inside: the sky looks as if it's about to fall. Leith gathers up her things and steps out onto Lakeshore Road on the way to the car. It's a street she knows so well, a street we now know, thanks to *The Tragedy Queen*.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There are a number of references to art and the artist's life in *The Tragedy Queen*. What is the role of the artist in society? How does Vince see this role? How does Sal?
2. How are the characters in *The Tragedy Queen* who are the outsiders—Vince, Sal, Janet, McLoon—alien from the community? What traits do they have in common? What makes them outsiders? Do they want to fit in?
3. What is different about what Vince is doing in Sal's house from his usual routine? What mistakes does Vince make which lead to his downfall?
4. Vince sees language as a weapon, and his sympathies appear to lie with the francophones of Quebec. Why does he identify with the francophones?
5. Vince uses the term "tragedy queen" to describe Sal when he begins reading her journals. What does he mean by the term? Are there other meanings?
6. Sal writes in her journal about the happiness of the couple being premised on one partner's personal unhappiness. What questions does this novel raise about marriage? How different are the various characters' requirements for a good marriage?

7. Vince is generally drawn to “ample” women such as Madeleine, Roseanne, Elizabeth Taylor and, especially, Jessye Norman. What does a woman’s size represent to Vince? What *is* his attitude towards women?
8. There are a number of parent-child relationships explored—Sal and her two children, Janet and Carrie, Carrie and Colleen, Vince and Thea. What do these various relationships say about being a parent?
9. How believable is Vince as a character? Have you known anyone like this? What do you think might drive someone to turn out as Vince has?
10. Did you identify with any of the characters? Did you find them sympathetic or likeable? Is it important for you in reading a book that there be a central character that you admire or like?
11. Is this an accurate portrayal of Canadian suburban life? Are the suburbs ripe grounds for infidelity and crime? Why or why not?
12. There are many women in the book who seem to be frustrated in their emotional lives, women generally disappointed by life. How do women cope with emptiness in their lives?

THE SALOME STORY

Linda Leith

My Salome is, first and foremost, a character in a novel—a contemporary woman in a contemporary setting. But names do have echoes, and I was aware of that when I chose the name Salome. While the story I have to tell in *The Tragedy Queen* is not that of the biblical Salome, it does owe something to more recent retellings of her story. Let me explain.

The modern version of the story of Salome that is probably most familiar today—especially to opera lovers—is the opera of that title by the German composer Richard Strauss, which, though it shocked audiences when it was first staged in 1905, has since become a standard of the operatic repertoire. And this in spite of the fact that Salome’s dance of the seven veils presents a challenge to some of the divas who have sung the role. Jessye Norman, that great interpreter of Strauss’ lieder, has not, so far as I have been able to ascertain, ever actually performed *Salome*. But I see no harm in letting Vince imagine her in the role.

Comparatively little known, and seldom performed—but of great interest to me—is Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome*, which Strauss used as the basis for his opera. Wilde himself was basing his play in some measure on a story written by Gustave Flaubert in *Hérodias*. Both these writers—indeed, all writers about Salome—look to the New Testament as their ultimate source. Without wishing to burden my Salome—or *The Tragedy Queen*—with too much literary and biblical freight, I hope you will find some of this source material enlightening.

The biblical story of Salome and John the Baptist is recounted in the Gospels according to St. Mark and St. Matthew. This is the more substantial version, from Mark 6: 17-29:

For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife,”

and Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." And she went out, and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the baptizer." And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

—Revised Standard Version of The New Testament

Flaubert embellished this story in what seems to me rather a revisionist manner in his *Hérodias*, in which John the Baptist is called "Iakanaan." The excerpt that follows, though long, does give some context for the engraving described in an epigraph to *The Tragedy Queen*. It also, as I think you'll see, helps explain how Oscar Wilde managed to turn the biblical Salome into his *Salome*. Besides, it's quite delicious in some of its details and worth reading purely for its own sake.

And she [Herodias] retold the story of her humiliation one day when she was travelling towards Gilead...

"A multitude was standing on the banks of the stream, my lord.... Standing on a hillock a strange man was speaking to the gathering. A camel's skin was wrapped about his loins, and his head was like that of a lion. As soon as he saw me, he launched in my direction all the maledictions of the prophets....

Continuing her harangue, she declared that the knowledge that this man still existed poisoned her very life.... Herodias strode to and fro upon the terrace, white with rage, unable to find words to express the emotions that choked her.

She had a haunting fear that the tetrarch might listen to public opinion after a time, and persuade himself it was his duty to repudiate her.

The tetrarch...paid no further heed to her anger, but looked intently at a young girl who had just stepped out upon the balcony of a house not far away. At her side stood an elderly female slave, who held over the girl's

head a kind of parasol with a handle made of long, slender reeds. The parasol half hid the maiden from the gaze of Antipas, but now and then he caught a glimpse of her delicate neck, her large eyes, or a fleeting smile upon her small mouth. He noted that her figure swayed about with a singularly elastic grace and elegance. He leaned forward, his eyes kindled, his breath quickened. All this was not lost upon Herodias, who watched him narrowly.

The terrible man [Iaokanaan] now turned towards [Herodias]....

“Ah! Is it thou, Jezebel? Thou has captured thy lord’s heart with the tinkling of thy feet... The Lord shall take from thee thy sparkling jewels, thy purple robes and fine linen; the bracelets from thine arms, the anklets from thy feet; the golden ornaments that dangle upon thy brow, thy mirrors of polished silver, thy fans of ostrich plumes, thy shoes with their heels of mother-of-pearl, that serve to increase thy stature; thy glittering diamonds, the scent of thy hair, the tint of thy nails—all the artifices of thy coquetry shall disappear, and missiles shall be found wherewith to stone the adulteress!”

Herodias looked around for someone to defend her....

[The banquet.]

A beautiful young girl had just entered the apartment, and stood motionless for an instant, while all eyes were turned upon her.

Through a drapery of filmy blue gauze that veiled her head and throat, her arched eyebrows, tiny ears, and ivory-white skin could be distinguished. A scarf of shot-silk fell from her shoulders, and was caught up at the waist by a dirndle of fretted silver. Her full trousers, of black silk, were embroidered in a pattern of silver mandragoras, and as she moved forward with indolent grace, her little feet were seen to be shod with slippers made of the feathers of hummingbirds.

When she arrived in front of the pavilion she removed her veil. Behold! She seemed to be Herodias herself, as she had appeared in the days of her blooming youth.

Immediately the damsel began to dance before the tetrarch. Her slender feet took dainty steps to the rhythm of a flute and a pair of Indian bells. Her round white arms seemed ever beckoning and striving to entice to her side some youth who was fleeing from her allurements. She appeared to pursue him, with movements light as a butterfly; her whole mien was like that of an inquisitive Psyche, or a floating spirit that might at any moment dissolve and disappear.

Presently, the plaintive notes of the gingras, a small flute of Phoenician origin, replaced the tinkling bells. The attitudes of the dancing nymph now denoted overpowering lassitude. Her bosom heaved with sighs, and her whole being expressed profound languor, although it was not clear whether she sighed for an absent swain or was expiring of love in his embrace...

The dancer was Salome, the daughter of Herodias...

And now the graceful dancer appeared transported with the very delirium of love and passion... She whirled about like a flower blown by the tempest...

Next she began to whirl frantically around the table where Antipas the tetrarch was seated. He leaned towards the flying figure, and in a voice half choked with the voluptuous sighs of a mad desire, he sighed: "Come to me! Come!" But she whirled on, while the music of dulcimers swelled louder and the excited spectators roared their applause.

The tetrarch called again, louder than before: "Come to me! Come! Thou shalt have Capernaum, the plains of Tiberias! My citadels! Yea, the half of my kingdom!"

Again the dancer paused, then, like a flash, she threw herself upon the palms of her hands, while her feet rose straight up into the air. In this bizarre pose she moved about upon the floor like a gigantic beetle; then stood motionless.

The nape of her neck formed a right angle with her vertebrae. The full silken skirts of pale hues that enveloped her limbs when she stood erect now fell to her shoulders and surrounded her face like a rainbow....

She made no sound; and the burning gaze of that multitude of men was concentrated upon her.

A sound like the snapping of fingers came from the gallery over the pavilion. Instantly, with one of her movements of bird-like swiftness, Salome stood erect. The next moment she passed up a flight of steps leading to the gallery, and coming to the front of it, she leaned over, smiled upon the tetrarch, and, with an air of almost childlike naiveté, pronounced these words:

"I ask my lord to give me, placed upon a charger, the head of—" She hesitated, as if not certain of the name, then said: "The head of Iakanaan!"

The tetrarch sank back in his chair as if stunned.

—From *The Works of Gustave Flaubert*
New York: Walter J. Black, 1904, pp. 329-354.

To this, Oscar Wilde added his own dramatic touches in *Salome*. I came across this play by accident when I was leafing through an edition of Wilde's plays looking for *The Ideal Husband*. *Salome* caught my attention—and kept it. It's not at all like Wilde's other plays, and on first reading, I found it puzzling. For me, that's always a good sign. The more I read, the more I was fascinated: by the play, by Salome herself, by her relationship with her mother, and by the interaction between Salome and Iakanaan. It's difficult to convey a sense of the play's ironies in an excerpt. But perhaps an excerpt can give you some sense of the play's subversiveness—which looks intriguingly feminist to me—and perhaps inspire you to read further. Incidentally, Wilde first wrote the play in French, for Sarah Bernhardt.

Salome: I am Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judaea.

Jokanaan: Back! daughter of Babylon! Come not near the chosen of the Lord. Thy mother hath filled the earth with the wine of her iniquities, and the cry of her sinning hath come up even to the ears of God.

Salome: Speak again, Jokanaan. Thy voice is as music to mine ear...

Jokanaan: Daughter of Sodom, come not near me! But cover thy face with a veil, and scatter ashes upon thine head, and get thee to the desert and seek out the Son of Man...

Salome: Suffer me to kiss thy mouth.

Jokanaan: Never! daughter of Babylon! Daughter of Sodom! Never.

Salome: I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I will kiss thy mouth.

Herod: Dance for me, Salome, I beseech thee. If thou dancest for me thou mayest ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee, even unto the half of my kingdom.

Salome: *(Rising.)* Thou hast sworn it, Tetrarch... I am waiting until my slave bring perfumes to me and the seven veils, and take from off my feet my sandals... I am ready, Tetrarch. *(Salome dances the dance of the seven veils.)*

Herod: What is it that thou wouldst have, Salome?

Salome: The head of Jokanaan.

Herodias: Ah! that is well said, my daughter.

Herod: No, no!

Herodias: That is well said, my daughter.

Herod: No, no, Salome. It is not that thou desirest. Do not listen to thy mother's voice. She is ever giving thee evil counsel. Do not heed her.

Salome: It is not my mother's voice that I heed. It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Jokanaan on a silver charger....

(A huge black arm, the arm of the Executioner, comes forth from the cistern, bearing on a silver shield the head of Jokanaan. Salome seizes it. Herod hides his face with his cloak. Herodias smiles and fans herself. The Nazarenes fall on their knees and begin to pray.)

Salome: Ah! thou wouldst not suffer to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. Well, I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit. Yes, I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I said it; did I not say it? I said it. Ah! I will kiss it now.... I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me.

—From *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, introduction by Edgar Saltus
New York: The Modern Library, nd. pp 1-44.



PHOTO: RON ROWER

LINDA LEITH