

She began a conversation with someone else then, and I was left to wonder about her comment, which was rather cryptic, after all. What had she meant by it? I have always been suspicious of the idea that there is a "best" of anything. I do not believe there are literary forms that are "better" than others either. There are no rules, no prescriptions, no single way to write. This does not mean that one puts judgment aside. There is good and bad literature, and there are good readers and bad ones, but establishing a fixed hierarchy is useless and perhaps even harmful. If my now vast experience as a reader counts for anything, it is that it allows me to identify with ease received knowledge, ideas lifted wholesale from other sources, and dead phrases. When Susan Sontag was at her best, she wrote from the inside out, not the outside in. When she spoke and wrote about the madness of sexual desire and the shocking transcendence that literature makes possible, her prose quickened because she was speaking from her own inner experience. She wanted to communicate the tumult, the strangeness, the passion of her own reading.

I think *The Benefactor* was a book written mostly from the outside, manufactured from the ideas and principles and theories about what a modern novel should be. I think her comment about "the inside" was a genuine compliment to me that was simultaneously a critique of a quality that sometimes appeared in her own work, a willful modernity. Many books are written from the outside in. On the few occasions I have taught writing classes, half my time has been spent disabusing students of their fixed ideas. "But I thought you had to show not tell!" "My last teacher said that dialogue had to be . . ." Most books, built of external rules and regulations, are far more conventional than Sontag's first novel. Some of them are extolled and sell hundreds of thousands of copies. This fact, however, does not make them any better. My bet is that they will go the way of Booth Tarkington. Dickens sold a lot of books. One can argue that his work is "accessible," but his novels were most decidedly generated from the inside, from the hopping interiority of his hypomaniac, indefatigable self.

There is an irony, of course. The outside becomes the inside. Every book that changes me becomes me. Its foreign music, rhythms, thoughts, and story settle into my body and may reappear in my own writing, but by then I no longer know they are there.

### "No Competition"

In her 1856 essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," George Eliot wrote, "Happily, we are not dependent on argument to prove that Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men." Would anyone argue with this today? Is writing an activity that depends on the sex of the writer? If it does, what does that mean? A survey in 2015 by Goodreads revealed that on average 80 percent of a woman writer's audience is female as opposed to 50 percent for a man writer's. In other words, men who write fiction have an audience representative of the world as a whole while women don't. No doubt there are particular writers who defy that average. Many more women read fiction than men. Still, a literary text is just that—pages of print. If that print has a male narrator, is it masculine? Does a female protagonist make it feminine? Is there some other quality that marks a book as sexed?

I am a woman writer married to a man writer (Paul Auster), and I have often been thrown into situations that have forced me to ask whether I am encountering sexism (either conscious or unconscious) or something else. Was the Chilean journalist who insisted that my husband had "taught" me both psychoanalysis and neuroscience (even after I told him this was most definitely not true, that my husband had little interest in either) a sexist idiot or just a man who wanted to believe his literary hero was more or less responsible for his wife's education? The man wasn't in the least bit hostile. He just seemed puzzled that in these subjects I was far better read than my spouse. What about the grand old man of French publishing who

had read my third novel and, with a magisterial wave of his hand, said, “You should keep writing”? Was he being pompous or condescending? In the summer of 2015, I received a fan letter from a woman heaping praise on my novel *The Blazing World*. There are nineteen different first-person narrations in that novel— both male and female. She had several questions, but one of them flabbergasted me. She wanted to know whether my husband had written the sections of the book that belong to one of the male characters, Bruno Kleinfeld. I know she asked me this in all innocence, but what does it mean?

Numbers tell part of a story but rarely all of it. It is interesting to keep tabs on the percentages of male and female readers of fiction, on how many books by men and women are reviewed and so forth, because they alert us to aspects of literary culture that would be hard to detect without them. And yet, the statistics don’t explain *why* it happens. Unconscious prejudice is now written about continually, but the interesting question is not that it exists but *why* it exists and how it works in all of us. Reading novels is one activity among many in the culture, and the way ideas of the feminine and the masculine infect our literary habits cannot be siphoned off from the larger culture, nor is it easy to discuss that culture as if it were an unvariegated block of consensus.

In 1968, Philip Goldberg conducted a now famous study using college women as his subjects. He gave two groups of students the same essay, authored by either John T. McKay or Joan T. McKay, to evaluate. John’s was rated superior in all respects. As with every study, repetitions of this one have come up with different results. Nevertheless, since then, study after study has demonstrated what I call “the masculine enhancement effect.<sup>1</sup>” A 2012 randomized double-blind study from Yale found that when science faculty judged credentials that had been assigned either a male or female name, the phantom man was offered a higher salary and more career mentoring than the phantom woman. Men and women were equally biased. Surely, few of these professors were aware they gave men a better deal. Am I aware of my own biases? Is objectivity possible in these cases? How can human beings rid themselves of qualities of which they have no consciousness? And again, why do men have the advantage?

In her book, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, the linguist and psychologist Virginia Yalain discusses what she calls “implicit gender schemas,” unconscious ideas about masculinity and femininity that infect our perceptions and that tend to overrate the achievements of men and underrate those of women. Women in positions of power are routinely evaluated less highly than their male counterparts even when there is no difference in performance. A 2008 study found that when academic papers were subjected to double-blind peer review—neither the author nor the reviewer was identified—the number of female first-authored papers accepted increased significantly. A 2004 study by Madeline E. Heilman et al., “Penalties for Success: Reactions to Women Who Succeed at Male Gender-Typed Tasks,” tells the story in its title. A 2001 study by Laurie Rudman and Peter Glick concluded with these words: “The prescription for female niceness is an implicit belief that penalizes women unless they temper their agency with nice ness.” In order to be accepted, women must compensate for their ambition and strength by being nice. Men don’t have to be nearly as nice as women.

I do not believe women are natively nicer than men. They may learn that niceness brings rewards and that naked ambition is often punished. They may ingratiate themselves because such behavior is rewarded and a strategy of stealth may lead to better results than being forthright, but even when women are open and direct, they are not always seen or heard. During a discussion that followed delivery of a paper at a scholarly meeting I attended, I watched a woman begin to ask a question. After a few words had escaped her mouth, a man interrupted her, took the floor, and expounded at some length. After that, she launched into her point again, and another man chopped her off in midsentence. At final count, four men had swooped into her remarks before she finally barged in and spoke her mind. By that time, her frustration had grown, and having gained the stage at last, she made a forceful, aggressive critique of the paper. After the meeting was over, I left the room with a male colleague who, referring to the woman, said, “She was really mean.”

We have all heard these stories. They have been reported again and again in many forms and in many places. What fascinated me about this incident was that the men who interrupted the woman did not seem to recognize

they were behaving badly. It was as if she were an invisible person with an inaudible voice, a disembodied phantom in the room. She was not young, sly, feeble voiced, or hesitant. In fact, she had none of the qualities that are often blamed for women's failure to be heard in meetings such as this one. Women are too meek. Women prefer a give-and-take style. Women are less aggressive than men and more socially oriented. They care about the feelings of others. This woman did not lack confidence, nor did she give a hoot about whether her comments offended the author of the paper. She just had a hard time getting a word in edgewise. Had she shouted her question from the start, she might have gained the floor, but at a cost. After grotesquely rude treatment, made even more grotesquely rude by the fact that the rude people were oblivious to their rudeness, she understandably delivered her pent-up words in a loud, emphatic tone, which was subsequently assigned the quality of meanness.

It made me sad. No, such behavior does not draw blood. It is just businness as usual, but the effects of this form of annihilation should not be taken lightly either. To speak and be not just ignored but talked over as if you do not exist is a terrible thing for anyone. It is an assault on a person's selfhood, and year after year of such treatment leaves ugly marks on the psyche. But how is it that those men were actually blind to that woman's presence and deaf to her words? What is actually going on? Once mastered, learning of all kinds becomes unconscious and automatic. Consciousness, it seems, is parsimonious, reserved for dealing not with routine and predictable perceptions in our lives but with what is novel and unpredictable. Rote activities call for minimal consciousness, but if while standing in my kitchen, I turn and see a gorilla pounding on the window, full awareness is imperative.

Perception is by its very nature conservative and biased, a form of typecasting that helps us make sense of the world. More often than not, when gorillas are not pounding on our kitchen windows, we see what we expect to see. We do not passively receive information from the world but are rather creative interpreters of it. We learn from the past through emotionally important events, perceive the present in light of that learning, and then project the lesson into the future. Somehow, that woman became imperceptible to the men who were speaking in that room. I am wholly convinced that the

men who talked over her would have been amazed and embarrassed had they seen a film of the proceedings. Beneath this common occurrence—men interrupting women—there have to be a number of experiences that become expectations, or what some scientists call "priors," which are strong enough to make an entire person disappear, at least for a while, but what are those assumptions or unconscious ideas exactly and what might they have to do with reading literature?

Another personal story holds some promise of an answer or at least a partial answer. I once interviewed the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard in New York in front of an audience. It was soon after the first volume of his massive autobiographical work, *My Struggle*, had been published in English. I am an admirer of the book, or rather books, both in Norwegian and in its excellent English translation (so far), and was happy to interview the writer. I had prepared questions, and he answered them sincerely and intelligently. Near the end of our talk, I asked him why in a book that contained hundreds of references to writers, only a single woman was mentioned: Julia Kristeva. Were there no works by women that had had any influence on him as a writer? Was there a reason for this rather startling omission? Why didn't he refer to any other women writers?

His answer came swiftly: "No competition."

I was a little taken aback by his response and, although I should have asked him to elaborate, we were running out of time, and I didn't get a chance to do it. And yet, his answer has played in my head like a recurring melody. "No competition." I don't believe that Knausgaard actually thinks Kristeva is the only woman, living or dead, capable of writing or thinking well. This would be preposterous. My guess instead is that for him competition, literary and otherwise, means pitting himself against other men. Women, however brilliant, simply don't count, with the possible exception of Kristeva, who I happen to know was all the rage during the time Krausgaard attended the University of Bergen, and she may have slipped into his book for that reason. Had he lived in another place at another time, Virginia Woolf or Simone Weil might have held the position of "literary or intellectual woman." Krausgaard is not alone in his dismissal of women as competition. In fact, he may simply be more honest than many male writers,

scholars, and other menfolk who don't see or hear a woman because she is *not competition*. I do not think this is the only reason for disappearing women in a room or in the broader zone of literature, but it is surely an interesting thought, one that should be addressed. Is Knausgaard simply conscious of an attitude that other men and women implicitly believe but cannot or do not articulate?

In an interview with a journalist from the English newspaper the *Observer*, Knausgaard acknowledged that as a child he was teased, called "Jessie" (gay), and admits he never recovered from it. "I don't talk about feelings," he said in the interview, "but I write a lot about feelings. Reading, that's feminine, writing, that's feminine. It is insane, it's really insane but it still is in me." The notion that reading and writing are *tainted* by the feminine has lodged itself deeply in the collective Western psyche. And Knausgaard is right, there is something *insane* about this idea. What does it mean that literacy, the grand and recent advance in the history of humanity, should be denigrated (Knausgaard makes it clear this is what he means) as a few, womanly business? When for centuries only a certain class had access to the privilege of reading and writing, and in that privileged class boys were the ones given superb educations, not girls, something Virginia Woolf wrote about in *A Room of One's Own* with notable bitterness, how have we landed in this curious cultural zone? And further, if literature itself is somehow feminine, why would women be pushed out of literary competition?

We, all of us, men and women, encode masculinity and femininity in implicit metaphorical schemas that divide the world in half. Science and mathematics are hard, rational, real, serious, and masculine. Literature and art are soft, emotional, unreal, frivolous, and feminine. In a paper advising teachers on methods that encourage boys to read, I came across the following sentence that echoes Knausgaard's painful childhood memories of being called girlish: "Boys often express distaste for reading as a passive, even feminine activity." Understanding and manipulating numbers doesn't carry the same stigma. Is doing arithmetic more active? Doesn't a child also have to master reading and writing? Isn't a mastery of reading and writing vital to negotiating the world? And since both numbers and letters are abstract signs, *genderless representations*, the prejudice against reading as feminine

is nothing short of stupefying, or, as Knausgaard put it, "insane." But the bias is associative. Anything that becomes identified with girls and women loses status, whether it is a profession, a book, a movie, or a disease. But the deep question here turns on the problem of feelings. What is it that made Knausgaard move straight from feelings to femininity?

Knausgaard might be called the contemporary king of automatic writing. *My Struggle* is an uncontrolled text. That is the nature of the project. I asked him about automatic writing in the interview, but he knew nothing about its history in either psychiatry or Surrealism. He also knew nothing about the French genre I queried him about: *autofiction*. In autofiction, a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky, the book's hero and the author's name must be identical, and the material for the book, although it can use the devices of fiction, must come from autobiographical sources. (Interestingly, in France, Knausgaard's book was largely ignored, as it was in Germany, where its title was not translated as *Mein Kampf*.) In the interview with me, he insisted that he never edited the book, never altered a word once it was written, and I have no reason to doubt him. The work is a raw, uncensored flood of words issuing from a vulnerable, bruised self, a self most of us recognize to one degree or another but choose to protect. It is the novel as an unchecked, autobiographical, often highly emotional outpouring, which nevertheless borrows the conventions of the novel form—explicit description and dialogue, which no human being actually remembers. This loose and baggy form means the reader must tolerate inevitable *longueurs*—meandering passages in which very little happens. There are also semi-philosophical digressions, musings on art and writers and ideas, some of them vibrant, others flat.

Knausgaard writes a lot about his "feelings," and he persists at it even when he is humiliated in the process, when he looks like a fool and a ninny. Such fearless openness is fascinating in anyone but may be more fascinating in a man because a man who reveals his feelings is at greater risk of being shamed for those revelations. He has farther to fall. The book shocked its Norwegian audience. Well before the English translation appeared, my Norwegian relatives and friends reported on the sudden Knausgaard frenzy. Misery memoirs are not fashionable in Norway;

with the exception of diaries, usually published posthumously, there is no tradition for the I-am-an-oozing-sore confession. The current legacy in the United States and England, if not in France and Germany, of the writer's tell-all, soul-bearing volumes is not shameful but heroic. Although Knausgaard has admitted to his own tortured qualms about the people in his family he hurt by writing his massive novel, critics have not regarded *My Struggle* as a morally compromised work. There are many ironies in all this, however, and they must be approached delicately if the "no competition" clause in the contract of the world of letters is to be understood with any subtlety.

Emotion and its open expression have long been associated with femininity and the corporeal. The novel has always been a vulgar, even despised form, closely linked to domestic life, women, and their feelings. George Eliot's anonymous essay was in part an attempt to distinguish her own serious, intellectual, and realist position on the novel from the ladies writing silly, unrealistic books with perfect heroines in overripe prose. This need for distance from feminine gewgaws was nothing new. In the eighteenth century, the novel, especially novels written by women and addressed to women, novels "for the Ladies," were held in low regard by critics. In "Gendered Strategies in the Criticism of Early Fiction," Laura Runge quotes Ambrose Philips, who advertised his periodical, the *Free-Thinker*, as "an elevating alternative" to "the insipid Fictions of Novels and Romances in which most women indulged." Runge further notes that the prefaces of these early novels encouraged "a bonding between the female reader and the female heroine, or . . . between the reader and the text personified as a woman." The novel has long been sneered at as a girly thing.

For the Romantics, feeling, which was regarded as a feminine principle, was bound to all of the arts, and we continue to live under their spell. The feminine man or man of feeling was a staple of the period. No one has forgotten Goethe's sensation, young Werther, his tender, aching sensibility, or his suicide that set off a rash of imitations. In his book *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Genders*, Thais E. Morgan notes the dangers involved for the Romantic poet who found himself on female terrain. Although Morgan's prose is awkward, his point is well taken.

"If imagining female voices of feeling opens an exciting resource for a male poet of feeling, Wordsworth's texts report a disturbing apprehension: that a man writing the feminine may be discovering and engendering more complex involvements of gender than he first imagined." In other words, becoming woman or allowing woman to creep into one's writing self may be dangerously transformative.

Knausgaard's journey into femininity is not parody or transvestism. His is not the world of Rabelaisian carnival or cross-dressing or the liberating joy that may arrive while playing at being the other sex, nor do his adventures mimic the famous fairy tale in which the man and woman change places for a day. She goes out to plow the fields, and he stays home with the children. The moral of the story is that the man, who had derided woman's work as effortless, discovers that it requires an agility and skill he lacks. No, Knausgaard's minute descriptions of domestic life, the potato peeling and diaper changing, the hostile feelings he bears toward the children he loves, and his rage at being trapped and suffocated by household responsibilities, belong to nothing so much as the woman's narrative. Indeed, Knausgaard's scrupulous details of domestic reality summon the eighteenth-century English novel, Richardson's *Clarissa* in particular, and, as in Richardson, these homely particulars are dignified, even ennobled, as part of a singular, human story.

In an essay for *Slate*, Katie Roiphe argues that the very same catalogue of housewifely chores and the misery that goes along with it would not have had the same critical impact had *My Struggle*'s author been a woman. Roiphe is quick to point out that this would be true for both male and female reviewers. She does not undermine Knausgaard's achievement. She is a fan. Rather, she is pointing to a contextual problem. What if it were a woman moaning about motherhood and its frustrations, a woman filled with resentment about preparing dinner and doing the laundry, or a woman wishing she could just be alone for a while and write? Isn't this what Knausgaard longs for a good part of the time, a room of one's own and the freedom to write? If the thousands of pages of *My Struggle* are testimony to anything, it is that the man did find time to write.

But what if a woman were doing the griping? Roiphe doesn't say this, but the beaten-down housewife is a stock figure. Although the joys and sat-

isfactions of domesticity were romanticized well into the twentieth century, that angel of the house has had her wings clipped. Wasn't she, the restless, white, middle-class housewife, ably described by Betty Friedan? Her isolation was, of course, in part due to her privilege. Women working at menial jobs to support their families never had the luxury of being bored in their own homes. To those who insist that it is Knausgaard's great artistry that saves him from the banal, Roiphe counters that no matter how artistic, the hypothetical Carla Olivia Krauss, writing the same work, would never have been taken as seriously. In fact, Carla Olivia Krauss would disappear.

When a man becomes housewife, when he lives a story that has traditionally belonged to women alone, is that story new or old? Let us be frank. Any and every story sinks or swims in the telling, but still it is fascinating to think of *My Struggle* as a narrative of what Simone de Beauvoir famously called "becoming a woman." We know our narrator is a man because he worries about the manly. He will not use a rolling suitcase. It smacks of the feminine. He suffers from premature ejaculation, not a womanly complaint. The writer's father is described as a man of irrational, erratic whims and sudden explosive tempers, a petty tyrant who used his patriarchal power to humiliate his son, a boy who lived in a state of permanent alert under his progenitor's mastering gaze.

In Scandinavia, the expectation that men should participate in domestic and family life is greater than anywhere else in the world. Paternity leave is widespread. But more than that, one can feel a difference in the way women and men move and talk and carry themselves in these countries. There is a palpable sense that women have more power than they do in other places. In Norway, women have had the right to vote since 1913. As a writer, I am treated differently in Scandinavia. Journalists seem less eager to reduce my work to my sex or my autobiography than do journalists in France and Italy, for example. In the United States, it has also become more common for fathers to take care of their children, at least more than they used to. Knausgaard's epic may have foundered in France because the spectacle of a morose, diaper-changing, dinner-cooking dad has little traction in that still vigorously macho culture.

By cultural standards, *My Struggle* is, in fact, a highly "feminine text," attentive to the nuances of feeling that accompany ordinary domestic life. And ordinary life, I must add, is not lacking in drama. The scene Knausgaard describes near the end of the first volume of his six-volume work when he and his brother clean their dead father's house encrusted with filth is among the most powerful passages of fiction I have read in years. I thought to myself, this is cleaning as an excursion into metaphysical horror. Everyday domestic reality, long the province of the novel, is hardly benign. I have always thought that the simple act of gathering eight adults at a dinner party and asking each person to share the story of his or her family's life would quickly reveal that sickness, murder, suicide, drug addiction, violence, imprisonment, and mental illness may be harrowing, but they are startlingly close to all of us.

What does it mean in light of all this womanly, domestic stuff that Knausgaard does not regard women as literary competition? Is it fear? Is it the anxiety or the "disturbing apprehension" that reading and writing, which he himself construes at some deep level as feminine activities, can be redeemed only if women are excluded from literary history and the real battle of the books takes place among men? Is Knausgaard, as man and as text, an example of the psychic journey the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin explicates in her book *The Bonds of Love*? She argues that for some boys, not all, the need (common to, but different in boys and girls) to separate from the all-powerful mother of early childhood metamorphoses into contempt for her and for other members of her sex. Or is it a scorn for what is so overwhelmingly feminine in Knausgaard himself; that soft, hurt, feeling core of the personality, which he explores with singular courage in his writing?

Isn't it also true, however, that this girl-woman self must be actively countered by the boy-man self, that because this woman's narrative is actually a man's narrative, the danger of womanliness is all the more ferocious? I am not sure, to be honest, but I suspect these questions turn on the many anxieties involved in this particular literary phenomenon. Writing as a man, something I have now done a number of times, has made me deeply syn-

pathetic to male fears of emasculation. Furthermore, men are not alone in their resistance to those qualities coded as feminine. Many women adopt a masculine posture, depending on where they find themselves in the world.

A woman physicist, for example, is *masculinized* by her choice of work, while a male novelist is necessarily *feminized* by his. As a purveyor of feeling and sentiment, his masculinity is already compromised, and if he takes up that most feminine of feminine subjects, the drudger of staying home with the kids, he has traveled far from the Lone Ranger mythos of his sex. And yet, the stubborn fact that Knausgaard is a man, and a heterosexual one, toughens and enhances not only his author persona but his text, which we are meant to accept as an autobiographical mirror. This is an illusion, of course. No text mirrors phenomenological reality. Nevertheless, an attractive tension is established between the rugged, handsome, masculine figure of the novelist pictured on the book's cover and his feeling, feminine subject matter. Unlike other novelists who populate their fiction with characters who are not themselves, figments who reside exclusively in the world of the novel, the Knausgaard in the world and the Knausgaard in the world of the book are supposedly one and the same.

A woman novelist, on the other hand, is in double trouble. If she writes imaginary stories, such soft stuff is made all the softer by her female identity, and if she writes about her own experience in a memoir of domestic life, about the trials of having and caring for babies and children, about boring encounters with fellow parents at the daycare center or nursery school, about her peevish irritations and grievously lost independence, she may well vanish without a trace or be relegated to the ghetto that is woman's writing. Then again, she may not. The reception of fiction is fickle. If publishers could recognize success in manuscript form, publishing would be a very different business.

Because I write fiction and nonfiction and have an abiding interest in neurobiology and philosophy (still mostly male disciplines), I embody the masculine/feminine, serious/not-so-serious, hard/soft divide in my own work. When I publish a paper in a science journal or lecture at a conference in the sciences, I find myself on male terrain, but when I publish a novel, I stay squarely in female land. The audiences at public events vary

accordingly, from about 80 percent male in the sciences and philosophy to exactly the reverse at a literary reading or event. This gendered geography becomes the context for one's work and for its perception. Where exactly does competition come in?

Undisguised competition in the form of verbal sparring, one-upmanship, and the blow-by-blow dismantling of a paper are common in the sciences and philosophy, and they are certainly not unheard of in the humanities. I once gave a lecture on trauma and literature at the Sorbonne in Paris, and the questions came hard and fast once I had finished speaking. I loved it. For one thing, in these worlds, knowledge counts. The more you know, the better off you are, and I revel in the lively combat of ideas that takes place in these sequestered but intense worlds of the intellect. Further, I have learned a lot from such robust encounters. I have had my mind changed by them. Fighting about ideas is fun, and if you really know your stuff, instant respect may be granted and offers to share papers and perhaps engage in an email dialogue soon follow. Knowledge and thinking well with that knowledge have power: Implicit schemas and prejudice are not eradicated. Women sink from view in these worlds, too, as my story of the woman desperately seeking a little room for her words illustrates, but in the right circumstances, a brilliant, scintillating paper or lecture can break through the schemas and become a gorilla pounding on the window.

Writing novels does not rely on this kind of knowledge. Some brilliant novelists are strikingly erudite and others are not. Erudition is not what makes a work good, as novels by the likes of Lionel Trilling and Edmund Wilson and others have demonstrated so clearly, and, although the idea of the best and the biggest and the hottest and the hippest is omnipresent in popular culture, literary and otherwise, doesn't dog-eat-dog competition in the world of novels seem a little odd? What does that competition involve? Every writer longs for recognition and praise, but every writer must also know that the prizes and congratulations on hand are often ephemeral. Writing a novel is not like solving Fermat's theorem. The right solution in a novel is the one the novelist feels is right, and if the reader agrees, a match has been made. And this may be part of the problem. If literature is finally about "taste," if there is no ultimate mathematical "proof" of superiority or

inferiority, it may become all the more important to guard against the harpies and succubi lurking in the form itself. That said, competition exists in all enterprises, and competition creates envy and bitterness, global features of every subculture, scientific and artistic.

Competition can be lively play, a kind of mental dance or sport that invigorates its participants. Evolutionary psychologists advance the idea that women are not competitive or are less competitive than men, but this thought makes me howl with laughter. Where have these people been living? Are they blind to female ambition not just in the present but throughout recorded human history? This fantasy of competitive males and coy females requires a retreat to a foggy evolutionary past of hunter-gatherers on the savanna, the details of which must be left to guesswork. The idea that sexual selection has shaped literary culture is a neo-Darwinian notion of dubious merit. And yet, the idea of the promiscuous male mating right and left with any female in sight and the discriminating female lives on, despite the overwhelming evidence that far too many species violate this supposedly ironclad rule for it to remain standing.

I have no idea if Knausgaard was making a Darwinian reference to competition during his interview with me. He may have been. I love Darwin as a thinker and as a writer, and I do not dispute that we are evolved beings, but the neo-Darwinism of evolutionary psychology is a suspicious hybrid of Darwin and computational theory of mind, a hybrid that was in vogue in Norway some years before our meeting, due to a much-watched, much-discussed, wildly popular television show that the writer may well have seen or heard talked about. In this thinking, male competition is used to explain a long list of sex differences due to selected traits. Although it may be comforting to explain a need to be alone and free of the burdens of childcare or a fierce desire to punch out other male writers in the literary arena as a genetically determined trait, the weaknesses of this theory are many, and they have grown weaker with every passing year. Nevertheless, even stupid ideas can have power, and they infect perception. To look another writer in the eye and soberly declare that she and every other woman on the planet who ever lived are "no competition" (with the possible exception of Julia Kristeva) is a striking comment at the least.

The game, then, according to Knausgaard, belongs to men, and it is here that the story becomes truly sad for both sexes, it seems to me. In his lucid, mordant article "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," Michael S. Kimmel writes, "Men prove their manhood in the eyes of other men." Male status, pride, and dignity revolve around what other men think. Women don't count. Kimmel quotes David Mamet, a writer who has depicted all-male worlds more than once: "Women have, in men's minds, such a low place on the social ladder of this country that it's useless to define yourself in terms of a woman." From this blinkered perspective, men ignore or suppress all women because the idea that they might be trials in terms of human achievement is unthinkable. Facing off with a woman, any woman, is necessarily emasculating.

"Homophobia," Kimmel writes, "is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up; that we are not real men." This statement could, in fact, describe the ongoing terrors and humiliations of *My Struggle*. In the oddly hermetic, paranoid world of the heterosexual white man, the dirty secret, according to Kimmel, is that the anointed demigod does not feel all that powerful. Instead, he is beset by anxieties, feelings born of keeping up an untenable position, a kind of ongoing false self. Such are "the feelings of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel . . . power, but do not feel it." The man who rolls, rather than carries, a suitcase is in peril of becoming the weak woman or the swishy guy. He is taking a trip into the scary, polluted territory of women and gays, where the real man's manliness might be exposed as a flimsy front. The irony is that the underbelly of white male power, of the clubby, self-congratulatory, back-pounding, pugilistic posing is extreme vulnerability. Every human being is capable of being wounded. If the feelings that result from the inevitable cuts and scrapes every person accumulates in the course of a lifetime are understood as "feminine," then it seems to me we have all become terribly confused. The difference between male and female vulnerability may be that in a woman this quality fits into our perceptual schema more easily than it does in a man.

But humiliations are regularly visited upon women because women are not regarded as competition and are treated as ghosts in the room. Further,

when they are elevated to the position of serious rival, when the she-gorilla raps on the window and full attention is directed at her; the response can be joyful and welcoming, but it can also be vicious. A brilliant, young, beautiful neuroscientist I met at a conference told me the story of her public humiliation at the hands of an eminent, much older male colleague. I suspect this man couldn't bear the idea that a formidable intellectual threat to him had arrived on the scene in such a comely female package. His gratuitous cruelty in front of a large audience was too much for her. She cried. Tears, however understandable, fit perfectly into those implicit schemas that guide our perception. Women can't take it. They break down. My purely practical advice: Don't get excited. Don't raise your voice. Bite back. Bite back hard, but never cry.

Knausgaard does a lot of crying in *My Struggle*. His tears are not only "unmanly," they subvert the strong stoicism that permeates Norwegian culture. I know. I grew up with it. You had to have a damned good reason to cry—death of a loved one, a terrible accident that left you bleeding and maimed, agonizing illness, and even then, such a display was approved in private, certainly not in public. When *My Struggle* was published in Norway, it was as if a grown man had stripped naked, walked to the town square, and mounted a bench in order to wail and blubber in full sight of his fellow citizens. And in Knausgaard's case, it was made worse by the fact that the public was privy to the reasons, not always so grave, for his sobbing. A ban on tears can be hard on a sensitive child. I know about that, too, and I was a girl. Karl Ove Knausgaard knows about it because he was a sensitive little boy, and that may be even harder. Dignity and stiffness must rule the Norwegian soul. Norway used to be a culture of perpetually dry eyes. And yet, Knausgaard's *Knausgaard*, the hero of his immensely long personal saga, is a veritable swamp of lachrymosity. Such are the ironies of the literary world.

When I look back at the "no competition" remark, I suppose I should be offended or righteously indignant, but that is not at all how I feel. What I feel is compassion and pity for a person who made a remark, no doubt in earnest, which is nevertheless truly silly. Thousands of pages of self-examination apparently did not bring him to enlightenment about

the "woman" in himself. "It's still in me." It is not enough to notice that a feminine text by a man and a feminine text by a woman are received differently or to call attention to numbers that represent sexual inequality in the world of letters. It is absolutely essential that men and women become fully conscious of what is at stake, that it is blazingly clear to every single one of us who cares about the novel that there is something at once pernicious and silly at work in our reading habits, that the fate of literary works cannot be decided by a no-competition clause appended to a spurious homo-social contract written under the aegis of fear, that such a clause is nothing short of "insane."

And so I circle back to the beginning of this essay and to the words of a person who was not prone to silly remarks: "Happily, we are not dependent on argument to prove that Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men."