



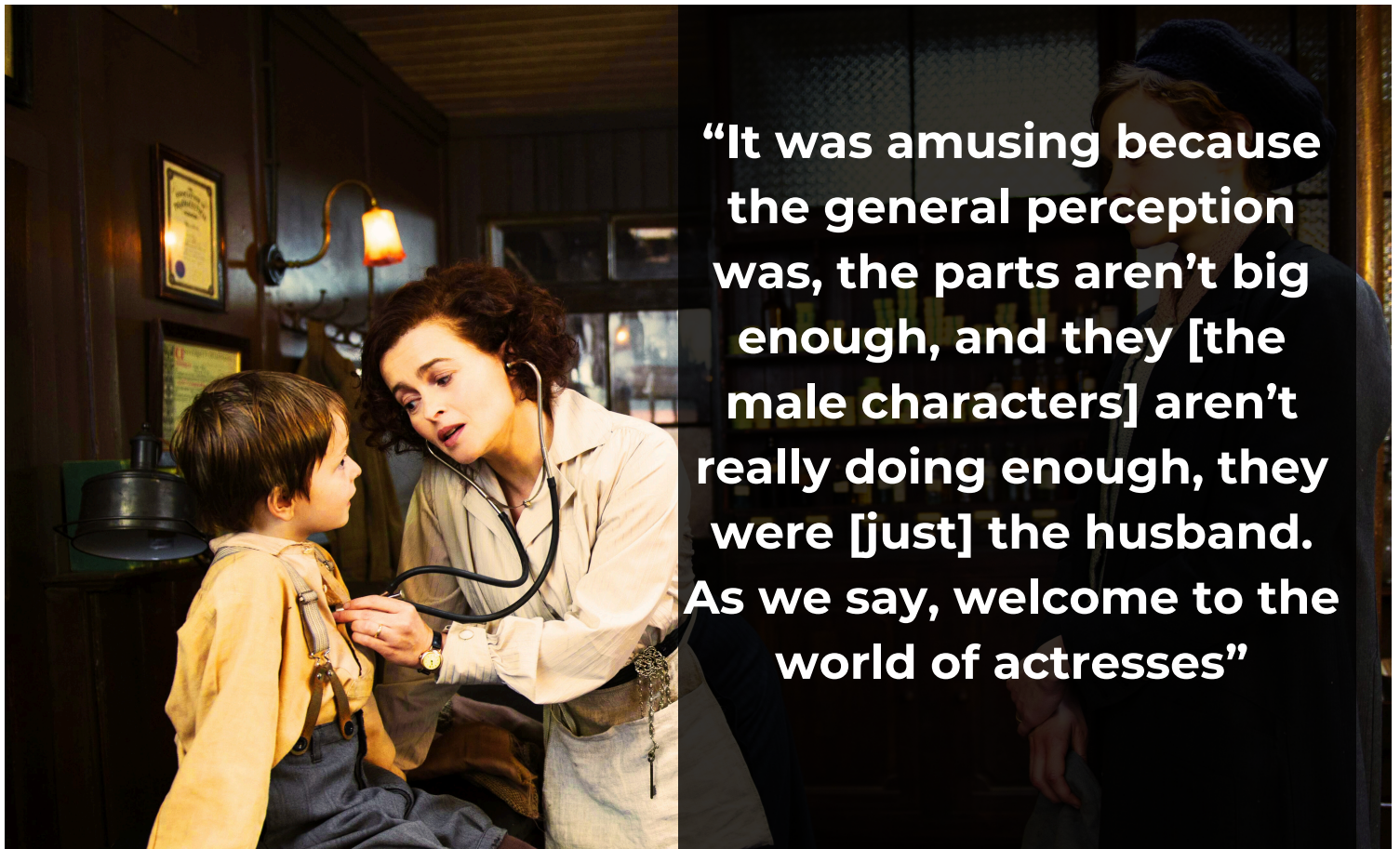
THE REVERSE BECHDEL TEST AND A LESSON IN GENDER APPROPRIATION

By

Devi Snively

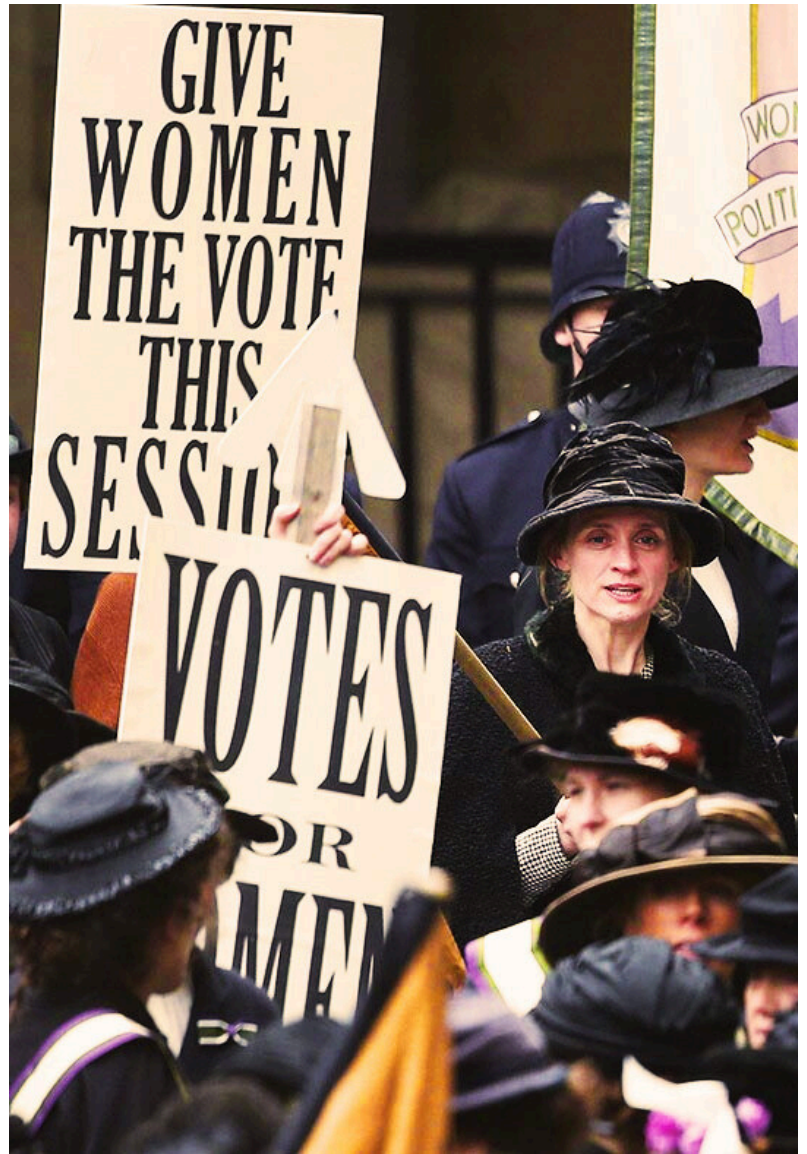
With all this talk about PASSING THE BECHDEL TEST and the implied stigma attached to films that don't, has anyone stopped to consider what films don't pass the Reverse Bechdel Test and the consequent repercussions therein?

I'd be willing to guess Abi Morgan has. After all, she penned the screenplay for *SUFFRAGETTE*, one of the rare films I've seen devoid of a single instance where two male characters speak with one another about any topic other than women. None too surprisingly, there were indeed repercussions, according to Morgan: "It was very hard to get men on board," she says in reference to casting name actors. "It was amusing because the general perception was, the parts aren't big enough, and they [the male characters] aren't really doing enough, they were [just] the husband. As we say, welcome to the world of actresses".



What a sad state of affairs, not to mention an egregious missed opportunity. It's bad enough studio heads and major producers have only recently begun to consider that OVER HALF OF ALL BOX OFFICE PROFITS HAIL FROM FEMALE SPECTATORS, and therefore, maybe (just maybe) it's wise to tell stories that might actually appeal to their most loyal customers. But we've come to expect such myopia from their type. After all, they're the ones who thought *MONSTER TRUCKS* and yet another *TRANSFORMERS* movie were good ideas. Clearly, those folks are out of touch.

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But big name actors, presumably artists, are the ones who are supposed to keep their souls intact—to be in it for the craft, the storytelling, the real movie magic. Maybe even to make a difference. They are also the ones coming out in droves, trying desperately to say the right thing in light of the #metoo movement, trying to let women know, “Hey, I’m not one of the bad guys.”

If that’s so, I’d like to remind them that just because you’re not sexually assaulting a woman or enabling somebody else to, doesn’t mean you’re not still part of the problem that’s created this toxic environment. Name stars, especially big male name stars, have a LOT of clout. So, why not put their money where their mouths are and support their non-fellow thespians? And while they’re at it, why not likewise support their sisters, mothers and daughters who are sick and tired of this perpetual cinematic sausage party that’s been foisted upon us at every turn?

Just sayin’.

Both male and female thespians, just like both male and female spectators have the power to make positive change. The former can demand better roles and storytelling or refuse to accept the part, and the latter can stop handing over their hard-earned cash to pay those who fail to do so. If we stopped focusing on our individual baskings in the spotlight and worked together for the greater cause, maybe the old adage about how there are no small roles would become a reality—on screen and in real life.

Now, what happens when boys write about girls?:

A Lesson in Gender Appropriation

There's been much ado on the topic of cultural appropriation in storytelling –often regarding the debate, “should a White person write a story about a Black person’s experience?” In a similar vein we might question the issue of gender appropriation, i.e. should a man write a story about a woman’s experience?

There are strong arguments on both sides, but my preferred take on the subject hails from author AMINATA FORMAN, who counters the old adage: “Write what you know” with a new, improved version: “Write what you want to know.”

I appreciate how this approach implies the need to conduct research. Here's where many accused of cultural and gender appropriation malpractice fall down on the job. If one simply makes assumptions about what s/he doesn't know, the lack of truth will distance those members of the audience who know better— maybe even insult them. Due diligence can prevent this problem.



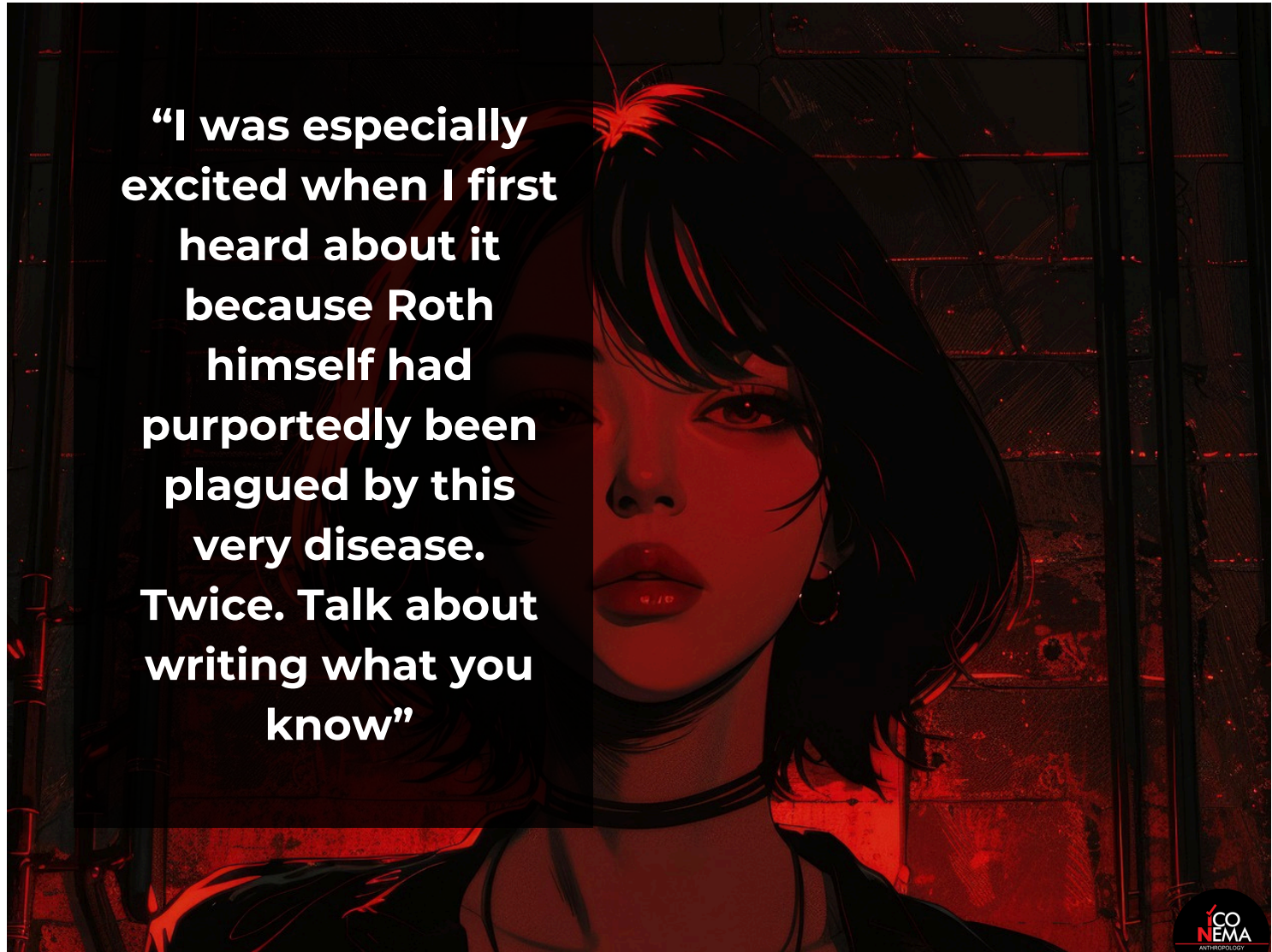
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Let's consider the following examples:

In Eli Roth's CABIN FEVER, three couples go to a cabin in the woods and, to quote IMDB, "fall victim to a horrifying flesh-eating virus." It's a fabulous premise for a horror film, and I was especially excited when I first heard about it because Roth himself had purportedly been plagued by this very disease. Twice. Talk about writing what you know.

Alas, the movie lost me early on thanks to the unnatural behavior of the women. And I wasn't alone. Ask just about any woman who's seen this film if she had issues with it and be prepared to hear an earful.

The most soft cited offense occurs when a female, struck by the flesh-eating virus, reacts by taking a bubble bath and shaving her legs. I kid you not. Now, bad enough that a character would show such poor judgment as to scrape a razor against flesh that's already peeling away on its own, but assuming Roth's not intending to suggest women are so stupid and shallow they're more concerned about the stigma of hairy legs than their own well-being, let's focus on a more mundane, but significant cultural reality.



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Knowing nothing more about this woman than the fact that she a) regularly shaves her legs and b) intends to engage in sex with a guy also on this trip (not to mention go swimming and wear short shorts), any leg-shaving woman will be quick to tell you this woman already shaved prior to going on the trip (and definitely prior to having sex—in the movie she shaves just after—weird.)

Now, had Roth conferred with a woman or two about the script, chances are she would have been quick to point out this absurd oversight. And had she, Roth might have become frustrated and said something like, “Well, I need this scene because it’s such a great gore effect—a woman shaving her legs and her skin peeling off.”

To which said woman might respond, “Oh, in that case, here’s what you do: on the ride to the cabin, have her discover that in her hurry to get ready, she’s forgotten to shave her second leg, which she only realizes when her fellow’s about to run his hand along the still fuzzy one—d’oh! She panics. And now we have a great motivation for stopping at that creepy drugstore a few scenes later. She needs a razor and shaving cream so she can fix this embarrassing situation before her fellow’s any the wiser.”



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Sure, freaking out about an accidentally unshaved leg is silly and shallow, but it happens, and most Western women, whether they shave or not, would recognize such a moment as genuine. What's more, it's humorous and justifies a scene that otherwise seems insulting and exploitative.

Now let's examine a positive example of gender appropriation, courtesy of the collaboration between director Patrick Lussier and thespian Betsy Rue in *MY BLOODY VALENTINE* (2008?)

There's a scene where Rue's character is having sex with her lover in a hotel. She's on top, staring at a mirror on the ceiling, admiring her naked body (naked save for high heels, that is). She says, "I look so hot" sans irony. She's unapologetically enjoying her sexuality. Her partner, a trucker, basically just has at it. Post-coitus, he's quick to get dressed and pack up his stuff. She takes a moment to reflect. It's about to be Valentine's Day, and she asks if he knows the holiday's origin story. He doesn't so she shares it as he gets dressed and prepares to leave. But, through the mirror, she sees him pull out a camcorder and slip it into his bag. She protests this violation upon which he offers to pay her. She declines, declaring, "I'm not a hooker." He tosses a bill at her and says, "You are now" then rushes out.



She grabs a gun from her purse and runs out into the parking lot after him—stark naked, save for her heels.

Inevitably, when I show this scene in a horror film class I teach, somebody, usually a male, will proclaim it sexist on the grounds of it being unrealistic and exploitative with the added "gratuitous" nudity. Then inevitably somebody else, always a female, will pipe in and explain why it's not only *not* sexist but downright revolutionary.

Why? Because they've set up this character as a smart, confident, unapologetic woman who knows what she wants and doesn't want. And in this moment she wants that blasted tape back.



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In the script, writers Todd Farmer and Zane Smith had this female character wrap herself in a sheet before running after her despicable lover. But I was thrilled, albeit not surprised, to discover the choice to run out naked was made by Betsy Rue who says, “I just felt a lot better forgetting the sheet. I felt like it was more real. I felt like I was in my reality. I was, like, “I would not be worrying about this stupid sheet right now! I just want the tape back.”

So, in short, the character remains true to herself. That’s independence. That’s strength. That’s believable. And *that’s* feminist.

Feminism is not about putting women on pedestals or about making exemplary role models of them. It’s about fair representation. Women are humans, each with her own distinct set of life experiences specific to her as an individual as well as those shared by others of her gender, background and creed.

If more male screenwriters and directors sought candid input from diverse female collaborators, we’d see far better films with far better roles for women. For that matter, more female writers should likewise confer with more women because some of the most egregious recent examples of feminist *unfriendly* films I’ve seen have been penned, though rarely directed, by members of our own gender, a problem I’ll address in a later post.

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In the meantime, we should all strive to meet and consult with people whose life experiences and perspectives are different from our own. Just imagine the wonderful movies that would result.



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