

## A CONVERSATION WITH MY FAVOURITES

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I said:

With the door open I can hear a synthesizer being played in the apartment across the street. The sound continually tricks me into thinking an ice cream truck is arriving. I try and decide again and again if I should buy an ice cream, before realising again and again that it is an impostor of a sound, and no ice creams will be showing up.

I said:

Sometimes while I'm reading I realise that I've become just as interested in the author of what I'm reading as I am in what they have written. That's how I know that I've become a fan. That's what happened while I was reading an article about breast feeding called "Baby food" by Jill Lepore in the *New Yorker*.

Jill Lepore said:

Non-bathroom lactation rooms are such a paltry substitute for maternity leave, you might think that the craze for pumps – especially pressing them on poor women while giving tax breaks to big businesses – would be met with scepticism in some quarters. Not so. The National Organization for Women wants more pumps at work: NOW's president, Kim Gandy, complains that "only one-third of mega-corporations provide a safe and private location for women to pump breast milk for their babies." (When did "women's rights" turn into "the right to work"?)<sup>1</sup>

I said:

Breast feeding, employment, corporate power, work life balance, I love all that stuff, it's so interesting. I like how you use breast feeding as an example of how commercial forces ease, or pad, difficult situations and thereby take away the impetus for broader social change. I like how you show that woman end up fighting for a better place to pump milk rather than for the situation of inadequate maternity leave to be rectified. Jill I think you're great. I would like to know more about you, are you married? I bet your husband is pretty rocking.

Jill said (in "Baby Talk: The fuss about parenthood", another *New Yorker* article) something like:

I'm not particularly impressed by two recent memoirs about parenting "by grown ups determined to profess their parental ineptitude."<sup>2</sup> Parenthood is a relatively recent invention. These days people are more likely to receive information on how to be a parent from books where as in the past – 150 years ago, you didn't have to read a book because children were all around you, you would parent your ten brothers and sisters, and you would be a pro by the time you had your own children. Because people learn how to parent from books, they are never going to live up to what the books prescribe, and this leads, amongst other things, to a whole bunch of people writing memoirs about all the ways that they've failed as parents.

I said:

You get the impression that the people who have written these memoirs tell you absolutely everything about their lives as a kind of therapy, so in the end the reader can say 'no you're not a bad parent, you're a great parent.' Knowing that something is a 'tell all' account makes it totally un-intriguing, what's with that? I have no desire to read those tell all memoirs, where people confess everything about their personal lives, but on the other hand the skill with which you charted the history of parenthood makes me want to know more about your life. The fact that you're so good at knitting together history and observations about contemporary culture makes me want to

know more about you as a person, and the fact that you don't let on too much about your self makes me want to know even more about you. Your articles give a little hint about your own life, that you're a mother, but they don't gush it all out and that's what makes it intriguing. Intrigue is the opposite of tell all. Everyone knows you want what you can't have, and as soon as you have it you don't want it. That reminds me of that Lydia Davis story "Boring friends".

Lydia Davis said:

We know only four boring people. The rest of our friends we find very interesting. However, most of the friends we find interesting find us boring: the most interesting find us the most boring. The few who are somewhere in the middle, with whom there is reciprocal interest, we distrust: at any moment, we feel, they may become too interesting for us, or we too interesting for them.<sup>3</sup>

I said:

I've decided that wanting to know more personal information about an author is a pretty good litmus test for how much I like the writing of that author. For example I dive on any anecdote or gossip I hear about Lydia Davis's life (my friend Raphe's ex girlfriend's mother was really good friends with Lydia Davis and he actually got to have dinner with her once, though when I grilled him about what she was like he said 'pretty normal really' which was a bit disappointing to hear). When I find an author whose writing is so good that I'd be interested in anything about them it is an exciting occurrence because so often with other writers I think TMI.

I said:

True but what about when TMI (too much information) is the subject, for example Nicholson Baker. He is always giving TMI, that is what his work is made up of. He is a master of digressing, he makes tasks and occurrences that the rest of us would consider trivial and constructs monumental narratives around them. He makes bling mountains out of the everyday molehills. His second novel *Room Temperature*, is ostensibly about the 20 minutes it takes for him to feed his new baby, but in that 20 minutes you see his thoughts multiply and meander and mutate.

Nicholson Baker said:

I was in the rocking chair giving our six-month-old Bug her late afternoon bottle. Patty was at work. I had pulled the window shades halfway down: sunlight turned their stiff fabric the luminous deep-fat-fried colour of a glazed doughnut. Still visible from a year earlier was the faint outline in adhesive of one of the lengths of masking tape that we had x-ed excitedly over the window pains before a hurricane that hadn't panned out; below it, a metal tube of antifungal ointment lay on the still, its wrinkled tail spiralled back like a scorpion's, its Scotch-taped pharmaceutical torso of typed information so bathed in light now that I could make out only the normally pedestrian but now freshly exotic name of the prescribing paediatrician, "Dr. Momtaz..."<sup>4</sup>

I said:

*Room Temperature* is certainly not a memoir of parental ineptitude. Nicholson isn't telling all because he wants forgiveness for thinking about the colour of a glazed doughnut when he should be thinking about the lovely babied colour of his baby. He's telling all because he's trying to take things that seem very familiar and look at them in a new way. He is a master of TMI, he makes good writing, great writing from giving TMI.

I said:

There seems to be a TMI scale. While she is giving out vast insight and information about the world, Jill Lepore is giving out very little information about herself. Lydia Davis gives great insight about the world by precisely analysing thought

patterns – how the mind moves through ideas and how the mind copes with receiving information from the world (she is especially good on how minds cope with receiving giant shocks, such as the shock of love). Because she is analysing what brains do when they receive too much information the inclination is to think that she is giving out TMI about herself. In fact she doesn't give out that much at all, you never even find out the name of her lost younger lover in *The End of the Story* even though the whole novel is about reconstructing memories of this lost younger lover into story form. She could be analysing the movements of any brain, it just so happens that she has best access to her own, and in doing so some snippets of her life certainly float in. But I've said it once and I'll say it again, I could take a lot more. I'd love to know what colour her toothbrush is. And then there is Nicholson Baker, sure *Room Temperature* is fiction but there is little attempt to create a narrator that has characteristics that vary in any way from himself. Nicholson certainly gives TMI, when both his shoelaces break at the same time you know about it, but most of the time he succeeds in executing this TMI delivering manoeuvre. He uses TMI instead of plot, instead of getting dragged along a narrative thread, you get dragged further and further into his day. At the end of all that I don't feel like I need to go out of my way to find out anything else about him.

I said:

I am a fan of Nicholson, but I'm much more fascinated with Jill, and Lydia. I think this may well be because they are women and I am a woman and Nicholson is not a woman. I feel like if I were to snoop further into Nicholson's life I could easily do it through reading more of his books and that his books are definitely interesting. But I don't think the desire to snoop into Jill's life and Lydia's comes from the desire to become better informed. I think it comes from a rather wonky thought, well really more like a delusion, that if I could find out how they – as some of the world's smartest women – live, then shit, surely that could shed some light on the ways I could best live.

I said:

I'm thinking about different uses for different people's nipples.

Nicholson said:

Even putting an idea in words, according to Arthur Schopenhauer, is a sell out: as soon as our thinking has found words it ceases to be sincere or at the bottom serious. When it begins to exist for others it ceases to live in us.<sup>5</sup>

Lydia said:

We feel an affinity with a certain thinker because we agree with him; or because he shows us in a more articulate form what we were already thinking; or he shows us what we were on the point of thinking.<sup>6</sup>

Jill said:

You know I think I need a god dam stopwatch at home that's what I need.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. "Baby food" by Jill Lepore, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/01/19/090119fa\\_fact\\_lepore](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/01/19/090119fa_fact_lepore)
2. "Baby Talk: The fuss about parenthood" by Jill Lepore, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/criticsbooks/2009/06/29/090629crbo\\_books\\_lepore](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/criticsbooks/2009/06/29/090629crbo_books_lepore)
3. "Boring Friends" by Lydia Davis, <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/2001/10/25davisweek4.html>
4. *Room Temperature* by Nicholson Baker. First published 1990. Grove Press, USA.
5. "Rarity" in *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* by Nicholson Baker. First published, 1996 by Vintage, USA.
6. "Affinity" in *Almost No Memory* by Lydia Davis. First published 1997 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York.
7. "Better Living" by Jill Lepore, "[http://www.newyorker.com/online/2009/10/12/091012on\\_audio\\_lepore](http://www.newyorker.com/online/2009/10/12/091012on_audio_lepore)"
8. Ibid.