

ISO or Lay Down I Think I Love You

September 29, 2008

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As a member of the Literary Club for the past twelve years, I have been somewhat disappointed that with all the scientists, professors, and physicians we have as members that no one, I repeat no one, has ever done a controlled, double blind, double bagged study of any topic what so ever. Therefore, I decided to attempt that.

My goal was to do a scientific comparison of Personal Ads. Comparing and contrasting those found in four esteemed publications --- The Village Voice, The Washingtonian (a slick monthly published in D.C.), The New York Review of Books, and, thanks to the advice of Henry Winkler, who knows his personal ads, The London Review of Books. I ruled out Screw, Stockman's Monthly, Trailer Living, and the National Review as possible sources. However, as with any scientific study some of the data collected did not quite fit. So as any self respecting researcher would do, I left that data out or slightly modified it; and in a modicum of full disclosure, I must admit that I have never written a personal ad, placed one, or responded to one. I suppose that may disqualify me as an expert, but what the heck. Research is research. Let's move on.

An ad that stimulated my interest in writing this paper appeared in the very first Personals column produced for the London Review of Books in 1998.

“67 year-old disaffiliated flaneur (translation: idler) picking my toothless way through the urban sprawl, self-destructive, sliding toward pathos, jacked up on Viagra and on the lookout for a female contortionist who plays the trumpet”

Now, I like the trumpet, so it got me thinking about doing this paper. As a 25 or so year subscriber to The Washingtonian, I have periodically read their personals column

always wondering which politician, Secretary of State, or other government official had placed it. I know that many of you will be shocked and amazed to learn that legitimate studies show that 35% of individuals placing personal ads are already married. Some admit it, but most don't.

NY Review of Books Aug. 16, 2007:

A Square Heeled Man. Lovingly life partnered, heretofore monogamous. unclandestine. Trim, boyish, retired. Seeks local, uninhibited lover. entirely open. (yeah, I'll bet!)

Washingtonian April 2005

Want to Dance? Married White Male, 39, 6', 180 lbs, tall, athletic, handsome, former dance instructor seeks adventurous married white female with time for afternoon lessons (in what!) and perhaps romance. Learn to dance no strings attached. (I can see the ladies drooling over images of a young Arthur Murray).

But wait. How did personal ads get started and what has been their evolution? The first newspaper in America that lasted longer than one day was James Franklin's New England Courant published in 1721. In England, it was the Oxford Gazette in 1665. Shortly thereafter, the first "advertisements", much later called classified ads, began to appear on a regular basis. Most of these dealt with lost property or animals, real estate, or stolen property. One of the first personal ads, an ad for a mate, appeared on February 26, 1759 in the Boston Evening Post.

To the Ladies. Any young Lady, between the age of Eighteen and twenty-three, of middling stature; brown hair; regular features, and with a lively bright eye; of good morals; and not tinctured with any thing that may fully so distinguishable a form; possessed of 3 or 400 pounds, entirely at her own disposal, and where there will be no necessity of going thro' the tiresome Task of addressing Parents or Guardians for their consent; such a one, by leaving a line directed for A. W. at the British Coffee House in Kingstreet, appointing where an interview may be had, will meet with a Person who flatters himself that he shall not be thought disagreeable by any Lady answering the above description. N.B. Profound secrecy will be observed. No trifling answers will be regarded.

The genre went downhill from there.

New York Herald July 16, 1866

Rose – It is useless – You are too lovely to be trifled with. I am married
Benedict. (probably a relative of Benedict Arnold)

New York Herald December 18, 1865

J.A.R. – Sarcasm and indifference have driven me from you. I sail in next
steamer for Europe. Shall I purchase tickets for two, or do you prefer to
remain to wound some other loving heart. Answer quick or all is lost.
Emelie. (Some people have the ability to stare reality in the face and deny
it.)

The English called the personals the agony column for all the anguish and
suffering they preserved. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's, Sherlock Holmes, admitted in The
Adventure of the Noble Bachelor that "I read nothing except the criminal news and the
agony column". Careful readings of today's personals can often convey a sense of
longing, loneliness, sadness; and also, as Holmes said "what a chorus of groans,
cries, and bleatings".

However, if one is to read personal ads they quite often require their own
dictionary. As Hugh Massingberd, the late poet laureate for the departed and former
editor of the Telegraph of London obituary page instructed us in his abridged
Massingberd-English dictionary, the following words should be translated accordingly:

Convivial – Habitually drunk

Did not suffer fools gladly – monstrously foul tempered

Gave colorful accounts of his exploits- a liar

A man of simple tastes – a complete vulgarian

A powerful negotiator – a bully

Relished the cadences of the English Language – an incorrigible windbag

Relished physical contact – a sadist

An uncompromisingly direct ladies man – a flasher

This rule came in quite handy when reading ads from the London Review of

Books:

You Think I Like Dressing This Way? Lanolin-sensitive
Cumbrian chick; outside all calico, inside pure wool. WLTM
Man to 40 who knows when to turn the lights down and the heat
Up. First aid skills a bonus. Box no. 3280

After reading this one, I was confused. She claimed to be wearing calico, cotton, on the outside and then pure wool on the inside. Was she wearing woolen knickers? I told my wife that there must be some secret code here. She agreed and had me call her good friend Naomi, who grew up in England. Naomi responded with an e-mail quote from Slang and Colloquialisms of the UK: Wool – Slut (noun) a dated expression and rarely heard, also slutty Adj. Sluttish. So now we realize that this Cumbrian chick has told us a lot about her self, her geographic location, her knowledge of dictionaries, and her moral standards. Too bad she didn't leave a phone number.

First time readers of Personal Ads will find a plethora of abbreviations. Most are fairly simple to decode: MWM – married, white, male. GBSF – gay, black, single female. Here's one from the Washingtonian November 2005 that Eliot Spitzer might have answered.

A PARAMOUR4YOU – SWF, ISO a generous MWM benefactor, 45 and up for a passionate relationship. Elegant in public and playful in Private. Well educated & attractive. Voice mail 27373

Of course, she left out the hourly rate. As my brother, who lives in Washington once told me “you want a friend in Washington, get a dog”. Other abbreviations take a moment's thought: WLTM – would like to meet a LRB-type – London Review of Books type,

which I assume to mean a little squirrely. Most personals will provide an abbreviation glossary at the bottom of the ads, but not in every issue.

Reading some of the more erudite ads often requires the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary at the ready. I referred to it several times, for example the word Gynocratic referring to a government of women or women as the ruling class. I thought we already had that. One word I have yet to find is himeros. However, I would recommend reading ads in short bursts. Slogging through multiple pages at a time, especially with the Village Voice or the Washingtonian, you get the impression that the ads were all written on a typewriter by a typewriter.

Personal ads flew under the radar until the late 60's and early 70's. With the dawning of the counter culture and sexual revolution, they became more blatantly prurient and interesting. The Village Voice, established in 1955 and the first large alternative newspaper, was a pioneer in this process taking advantage of the seething mass of desperate and dateless people in New York City and the surrounding area. Far and away the leader in categories of personal ads was the Voice featuring at least nine different interest groups. (I know I am amazing you with my knowledge of this subject.). they were: Write to Me Personals, VR Activity Pals, Men Seeking Women, Women Seeking Men, Men Seeking Men, Women Seeking Women, Multiples, TransGender, and last but not least Anything Goes. Believe me when I tell we are not going to discuss that in detail!

However, times do change. The Voice no long carries personals in the print version, but only in the on-line edition. I spoke with the Editor in charge of classifieds to find out what VR Activity Pals were. She and two others she consulted had no idea. They

have removed that section, along with Write to Me Personals, Transgender, Multiples, and Anything Goes, replacing them with No Strings Attached and Missed Connections. However, I would be terribly remiss if I didn't give you at least one example from the Anything Goes section:

Village Voice October 1, 2002:
Foot Worship: for the discerning woman. Single White Male at your Service. Ext. 5619

Suffice it to say that this section seemed to focus on various anatomical areas.

In the fall of 1999 the following ad appeared in the New York Review of Books:

New York Review of Books November 1, 1999
Before I Turn 67 – next March – I would like to have a lot of sex
With a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me.
NYR Box 10021

The ad was written by Jane Juska, a 66 year old retired English teacher, living in San Francisco, divorced for over 20 years with one son in his early thirties. The replies that she received and the adventures she experienced were recounted in her best selling 2003 book [A Round Heeled Woman: My Late Life Adventures in Sex and Romance](#). It is an often hilarious description of the men she met and the process of placing a personal ad; but it also lays bare, in a bittersweet way, her own loneliness and in a couple of instances the rejection she felt. She was moved to action after seeing the film “Autumn Tale” directed by Eric Rohmer, which involves a woman placing a personal ad in a newspaper on her middle-aged friend’s behalf.

Alex Witchel, who reviewed the book for the New York Times must be a very young man because he felt it necessary to define the term round-heeled as “an antiquated slang expression for a promiscuous woman”. That makes me feel very old since that was a popular slang description when I was young. As an English teacher, Ms. Juska pointed

out the inanity and repetitiveness of most ads she read in preparing her own: long walks on the beach, love of nature, wine, opera, poetry, and sunsets. Funny, no one ever seems to mention scotch or vodka.

Washingtonian April 2005

Serve Me Well – Lovely professional, smart, honest sincere with a sense of adventure. Enjoys dining out, travel, sunsets, fine art, museums, and Pampering. Accepting single attractive gentleman.

(using the Massingberd dictionary we can at least learn that she can't cook and the guy ought to know how to clean house)

In the same issue we find:

Slender Attractive Lady – tall, fifties, delightfully different. Enjoys the the outdoors, traveling, walks, beaches, dining in/out with romantic educated, interesting SWM 56+ gentleman. (they are both looking for gentlemen. Good luck ladies)

Poetry seems to be a hook for the guys. There were multiple ads, particularly in the New York Review and the London Review that started out as “45 yo SWM Poet” or in the text behind “sunsets on the beach” - “interested in poetry”. This was the best:

New York Review of Books February 8, 2008

Poet in Pennsylvania prison for 37 years, innocent man, Educated, fit, seeks connection to the world. NYR Box 49203.

Perhaps it was this ad that prompted a lady in the London Review of Books to end her text with an adamant “no Poets”. Or this one from the Washingtonian:

25 YO Single Asian Female (SAF) – ISO mentor for existential angst. School me in repartee, the monomyth, liminality, where the song Comes from. Must be strong independent thinker. Must not judge. Philosophers need not apply. (I guess that leaves Carl Rove out)

As I said earlier, times are changing. The volume of print personal ads has dramatically diminished over the last five years. The Village Voice no longer carries them in their print edition. The Washingtonian is down to one page verses three not so

long ago. The London Review and the New York Review each carry only a page and sometimes only a column or two; but the London Review has served mankind well by publishing, in 2006, the best of their personal ads in a book entitled They Call Me Naughty Lola: Personal Ads from the London Review of Books. They are currently gathering new material for another volume.

But where are all the ads going? The internet of course. There are thousands of web sites out there that will hook you up with the love of your life be it male, female, or a Marino sheep. They certainly demonstrate less restraint than the print ads. Two of the most popular, according to my wife's friend Naomi, are **E-Harmony.com** and **Match.com**. I'll pause for a moment for anyone taking notes.

How can we judge the current personal ad? Are they real? For some, we hope not. Are they truly lonely, but intelligent people reaching out for warmth and affection? For most, we hope so. Or are they simply weird people exercising their literary talents. David Rose, the advertising director of the London Review of Books discusses that topic in his Foreword to They Call Me Naughty Lola, after mentioning the following ads:

“Romance is dead. So is my mother. Man 42 Inherited wealth”

“I like my women the way I like my kebab. Found by surprise
After a drunken night out, and covered in too much tahini”

“117 year old male Norfolk Viagra bootlegger finally in the mood
For a bit of young toddy”

with their self-flagellation, self-puffery, deprecation, and outrageous humor he says “For some LRB advertisers, meeting a partner is no longer even the main objective of placing a personal ad. They're a frolic, a bit of whimsy. The silliness, in this sense,

becomes a sleight of hand, a trick done with mirrors to disguise the machinery beneath the stage.

I will leave you to judge, if you have the stamina to slog through long lists of personal ads. To quote my favorite contemporary thinker and writer Christopher Hitchens in an article in *The Nation* – “the four most overrated things are Champagne, lobsters, anal sex, and picnics.” To that I would like to add Personal Ads.

References

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