

Sex, Cars, Underwear –

Playing with Guys' Toys

How Arachne Manteia, the woman protagonist in Aritha Van Herk's *No Fixed Address*¹ challenges the symbols of long worshipped male amusement

Guys like to play! Even though this statement at first appears like a mere stereotype, such as “women belong to the home”, there seems to be some truth about it. Yet, guys do not play with anything! They sure are picky about their choice. There seems to be a well established collection of genuinely masculine toys that women can hardly gain access to. The soft and well polished leather soccer ball for 50 dollars. The good old Maerklin miniature model railway that makes big boys eyes' twinkle. The 100,000 dollar old timer that is fostered with a tenderness that many wives do not believe their husbands to be capable of....

What all these examples have in common is the notion in society that they are labelled: Boys Only! No doubt, in many of these cases women, 'emancipated' or not, do not have any reason to feel disadvantaged because there just is not much adventure to miss. Thus, thankfully, there are of course many women who are engaged in originally male dominated activities and who have no trouble challenging long denied but still existing gender roles.

One such character was established by the Canadian novelist A. Van Herk. By taking a closer look at her protagonist, Arachne Manteia, one learns a lot about women acting in guys' playgrounds and how well they can handle guys' toys.

¹ References in the text according to: Van Herk, A. (1998): *No Fixed Address. An Amorous Journey*. Alberta: Red Deer College Press.

The Traveling Sales(wo)man Problem

When doing research on traveling sales representatives one instantly faces a problem: The ‘traveling salesman problem’. There are hundreds of books around providing highly sophisticated solutions for a rather simple economic problem: How to figure out the smartest, i.e. the shortest and therefore cheapest route for a traveling salesMAN. All the definitions mention “the salesMAN” who is confronted with the problem. That certainly causes confusion. Are there only men who happen to have this particular problem and women know how to do without complicated arithmetics? Or is it that there are no women working as traveling salespeople at all? When seeking an answer to this question, a look at the library’s online catalogue provides the following answer: “SORRY! 0 files found”. This astonishing finding suggests that female traveling sales people indeed do not seem to play a significant role in literature. Salesmen, on the other hand, show up in various forms, particularly dead, as one can learn from Arthur Miller. By looking at this rather discouraging research result the observer can draw the first conclusion: The simple fact that Arachne is a woman sales representative already makes her step on male terrain – in other words: she plays in the guys’ playground. Moreover, she is not one among many, she is an award winning saleswoman, “[...] one of a dying breed” (175) who “will never find a job that suits her better” (181). Her male colleagues can only look up to her. Yet, despite the work sphere in which Arachne operates, a look at the products she sells reveals even further findings.

Underwear – Selling Guys’ Toys

The history of underwear is a long and mostly painful one. Women throughout the centuries have tried all kinds of things to attract male attention by forcing their bodies into bits and pieces of

scratchy, leathery or even metallic material. One only needs to think of the glorious invention of the corset which made women's organs wander to places within their body, where they could hardly be suspected. But not only do these pieces of underwear in many cases cause physical pain, they are also harmful to the psyche of a woman. As Arachne's own painful bra-shopping story depicts (cf. 98ff.), there are a lot more catastrophes involved than many might imagine. However, wearing underwear has become a sort of social convention. "Imagine. Old ladies and respectable wives without underwear" (175), as one of Arachne's colleagues and going-to-be-lover asserts. But Arachne stopped imagining a long time ago, for her not wearing underwear has become reality. The smart fellow then later discovers that the woman he is about to 'unwrap' is not packed up in some nice little lingerie that would allow him to satisfy his play instinct. This means that she does not count among the "respected wives". "It's principle" (179), he then concludes, for he cannot possibly imagine any other reason for such a behaviour. Yet, with respect to Arachne's determined opposition to wearing underwear due to practical causes, this conclusion is indeed partly true. However, for her underwear also represents pleasure, yet in a very different way. She certainly proves to be able to make money selling it, thus she in some way also uses it as a reason for her pleasure. Selling underwear justifies her constant travels. This she does not practice like any other sales rep, no, she uses a special vehicle for her travels, something that guys dream of.

Rewriting Car Culture

"[A] monolithic black boat with a high front grill, a six-cylinder, overhead cam, inline, water-cooled, fuel-injected, four-speed ticket to flight" (131).

No, this is not an excerpt from an engineer's lecture class or some dialogue in Star Trek, this is what one is told guys dream of: a car. More precisely, it is a "1959 Mercedes Type 300" (130). But contrary to the good old stereotype it is not a man who goes daydreaming about the vehicle, it is a woman bus driver and future sales rep. This means, Arachne again has gained possession of one of guys' most beloved toys. However, to her the car means more than just a toy. "Arachne has nothing to do with the pleasure George derives for the car, [who] works out of his lust for [it]" (60). Lust also plays a role in her attribution of the car's value but in a different way. Because "[n]ot driving makes Arachne nervous" (101). The car helps her satisfy her "inordinate lust to drive" (138). As the reader learns from the omniscient narrator, Arachne is deeply afraid of arriving somewhere and needs to be always in motion, to prevent her from arriving somewhere to lead a static life. In this process the guys' toy is personified, it becomes a companion and protection to her. Arachne and the Mercedes belong together, they are "legend" (175) and at the award ceremony she and her Mercedes express their thanks. When looking at this complete reversion of stereotypes it is not surprising to notice that it is not some male frenetic car fan who is willing to pay an immense sum for the car, but a woman (cf. 205). Of course, Arachne does not abandon her 'partner', as he takes her to further erotic adventures.

Playing with Sex

"A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle"
(172).

This very telling slogan is the only one to be found on one of the panties, A. Manteia is selling. The message is not hard to decipher: No one actually needs men, but just like the bike means fun to the

fish, men can be fun for women². At least, they can be used for diversion, instrumentalized as toys. When asked by her friend about sex with strangers Arachne indifferently and without hesitation mentions the toy aspect: “It’s a game, something to do” (141), not more. In another passage the reader is told that she “played” (177) with her potential lover over several days for the purpose of evaluating him. This very rational, cold-hearted and even humiliating attitude towards sex has always been attributed to men. Men keep out emotions, men play with girls, men use women as their toys. Again, in this case, this picture is completely turned upside down and neglected in a most radical way. When Arachne tries to prevent getting a ticket for exceeding the speed limit she does not employ the good old emotional and heart breaking weapons of a woman. No, she simply hates the idea of bursting into tears, even though, she once did so. This emotional outburst is a “device” (85) that she is not willing to employ, something too personal. She therefore prefers sex. Even though, the situation is far from offering her pleasure, it represents the more acceptable option. After all, “[t]here is something square and direct about fucking for its own sake, no other considerations: wifely or husbandly duty, buying, selling, payoff, gratitude” (179).

After looking at some of the incidents in which Arachne Manteia finds herself acting in a men’s playground and literally steals guys’ toys, the question of motivation as was discussed earlier in the context of Arachne’s habit to not wear any underwear needs to be picked up again. Is it principle that drives her, experience, or even revenge? As much as one learns about her mostly “amorous” contacts with men in the course of the novel, there is not much explicit information on her thinking regarding gender aspects. At

² The reader in this case needs to possess enough imagination and flexibility of mind as to be able to consider that a fish, even though, there never has been one detected, could under special circumstances ride a bike.

least, there seems to be some general rather traditional understanding in her mind, where men do not self-evidently move around in the kitchen, because “[i]n her world, women do these things” (93). Bearing in mind the conversations she has with her friend Thena, it becomes obvious that Arachne is far less concerned with “[t]he fucking male-dominated [...] world” (203). Yet, what distinguishes the main character from many others and what makes the novel so refreshing is exactly that special way in which Arachne deals with the topic: she does not lose time talking, she acts.